HOW HAMAS SURPRISED THE MOST POWERFUL MILITARY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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YAAKOV KATZ AND AMIR BOHBOT

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Table of Contents

About the Authors

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To the fallen and the heroes
from October 7 and the war that followed

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INTRODUCTION

A Country Asleep

The female soldiers stood alongside the cold gray concrete slabs, their wrists bound with plastic zip handcuffs. Most were still wearing pajamas, and many had blood dripping down their faces from the battle that had just ended. For some, it was their own blood; for others, it was the blood of fifteen of their friends who had been mercilessly slaughtered before their eyes.

The seven soldiers—Liri Albag, Karina Ariev, Agam Berger, Daniela Gilboa, Naama Levy, Ori Megidish, and Noa Marciano—were part of a unit in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) called *tatzpitaniyot*, Hebrew for "observers." These women—just nineteen and twenty years old—were in the middle of their two-year compulsory military service in the IDF and were stationed at the Nahal Oz base a few hundred yards from Israel's border with the Gaza Strip.

Known as the "eyes of the army," the soldiers had one clear job: they manned screens inside the base that watched every inch along the tenuous and battle-scarred Israeli-Gaza border. Few international lines of demarcation have seen as much violence and bloodshed as this area in Israel's southwest, and it was the job of these women to track everything. If a farmer ventured too far from his field, they called it in. If a shepherd appeared to be acting suspicious along the border, they alerted security forces. People would joke that they even tracked mosquitoes if they came too close to the fence.

The role was created in the early 2000s when the IDF was still stationed inside Gaza, and the first observers were deployed inside the territory. It was a tedious task, predominantly assigned to female soldiers, who, according to military studies, possessed superior visual acuity and observational skills compared to their male counterparts.

Most of the time, *tatzpitaniyot* made it into the news due to complaints over their working conditions. They spent hours sitting in front of screens, received few breaks, and lived on run-down bases. The job was not always exciting, but over time, the young women became experts in their region. They knew when something looked suspicious and out of the ordinary, and when it did, they told their superiors.

At 6:29 A.M. on October 7, the piercing wail of missile warning sirens shattered the morning calm across southern Israel. The soldiers, many of them tired from night shifts and long workdays, were jolted awake by the cacophony of Iron Dome missile interceptors and alarms. Their commanders urgently herded them to the "safe area," a small outdoor space fortified by massive slabs of gray concrete designed to shield them from rockets and mortars.

No one knew at the time that the rocket fire was just a distraction. Roni Eshel, one of the *tatzpitaniyot* on duty in the command room, issued a calm yet urgent broadcast: "All stations receive: Four people are running to the fence. Confirm receipt. Two armed people are running at the fence. Confirm receipt."

Then, moments later, Eshel uttered the dreaded code phrase, an IDF term for their worst nightmare: "Turkish horsemen," signaling a border infiltration.

"One has crossed fence and is armed," she said more urgently. "Confirm receipt!"

Within minutes there were more terrorists blowing holes in the fence all along the border. Eshel and her fellow soldiers activated the remote-controlled guns deployed on the turrets along the barrier. Some of the terrorists were stopped but most got through, and within minutes they cut the electricity to the cameras. The soldiers were blind.

The nineteen-year-old soldier then issued her final broadcast: "They have blown up the hourglass [IDF code for the fence]. Three men are

currently on Burma [IDF code for the road next to the security fence situated in Israeli territory]. They are armed. Confirm receipt!”

At this point, as hundreds of rockets rained down on Israel—from Nahal Oz in the south to Tel Aviv in the center—thousands of Palestinians, including hundreds of Hamas’s elite Nukhba fighters, were blowing holes in the border barrier on their way to commit an unprecedented massacre inside Israel.

Eshel apparently lived for another few hours until she and fifteen of her fellow soldiers were brutally murdered, some in the command center and some outside. Seven managed to escape. It would take the IDF more than a month to identify Eshel’s body, and initially she was believed to have been abducted by Hamas.

One of the soldiers stationed that weekend at Nahal Oz was Daniel Perez, a twenty-two-year-old officer in the armored corps. He ordered his men into their Merkava Mk 4 tank, and for about an hour they succeeded in pushing back some of the Hamas infiltrators. But when they thought they were done, they looked into Gaza and saw hundreds more coming. The tank was overrun, and Perez was killed. Together with those of two other members of his team, his body was seized by Hamas and taken into Gaza.

After the Hamas members had infiltrated the base, they engaged in firefights with the soldiers—or to be more accurate, the few who had weapons. Due to the sirens sounding because of the rocket and mortar fire, the *tatzpitaniyot* had gathered unarmed in the designated protective space in the middle of the base, and when the Hamas fighters broke in, they shot anyone who was in their way, killing more than fifty soldiers in the small outpost.

The female soldiers’ correspondence with their families that morning is chilling. Liri Albag texted with her family as the attack was unfolding. “Did terrorists infiltrate from the sea?” one of her family members asked in the Albag family WhatsApp group. “Yes,” Albag replied, to which one of her family members replied: “That is not funny.”

“I am not kidding,” she wrote back, adding a few minutes later: “They have penetrated the base and are shooting. I have not been hit.”

Daniela Gilboa’s mother wrote to her around the same time to get an update. “Mom, pray for us,” Daniela replied.

“What happened?” her mother wrote. “Are you in a safe place?”

Daniela wrote: “Please, just pray mom. This is not the time for questions.”

Karina Ariev managed to speak on the phone with her sister, Sasha, who heard the sounds of gunfire in the background. “If I don’t survive, still be happy with your life and take care of mom and dad. Don’t forget to keep living,” Karina said. Before Sasha could respond, the call went dead.

In May 2024, the anguished families of the female soldiers still being held hostage in Gaza at the time released a chilling video from that morning, compiled from the bodycams worn by some of the Hamas attackers.

The footage unveils a harrowing scene: the IDF soldiers stand against the concrete wall, their faces stricken with terror. One of the terrorists yells: “You dogs, we will step on you!” Another instructs his accomplice to “take their pictures.” The IDF soldiers, their faces bloody and swollen, appear frozen in shock. One of them whispers in English, “I have friends in Palestine,” grasping for a shred of mercy.

Another soldier, her voice trembling, pleads “[Is there] someone who speaks English?” amid Arabic shouts. A Hamas gunman orders them to sit, and as they comply, another threatens, “Our brothers died because of you. We will shoot you all.”

The video abruptly cuts to a disturbing scene: five Hamas men prostrate on the shelter floor in prayer, while the women remain tied up behind them. It is a scene that would later draw fury from some devout Muslims, who wondered how these men could pray as they were committing the most barbaric acts known to mankind.

One of the Hamas fighters can be heard saying: “Here are the women who can get pregnant.” Another looks at one of the soldiers and says: “You are so beautiful.”

As the female soldiers were being taken hostage, thousands of Israelis were fighting for their lives in the towns, kibbutzim, and fields along the border. Hamas terrorists had blown dozens of openings in the border fence and infiltrated almost all of the neighboring communities, including two of the nearby larger cities of Sderot and Ofakim. Everywhere they went, they raped, murdered, and abducted. No one was immune, and in the fields near Re’im, where the Nova Music Festival was taking place with the

participation of some 3,000 partygoers, Hamas terrorists slaughtered more than 360 people.

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Kibbutz Nahal Oz, adjacent to the IDF outpost, was one of the first Israeli communities established near the Gaza border, and on October 7, as the nation celebrated Simchat Torah—a holiday that marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings—the kibbutz was also intending to celebrate its seventieth anniversary.

The kibbutz was founded in the 1950s by a group of soldiers who were trained in agriculture, tasked with plowing the land and then guarding it.

In Israeli culture, Nahal Oz is much more than just a border community; it is a symbol of Israel's pioneering spirit, of its resilience in the face of adversity, and the shield that Israeli farming communities have always proven to be along the country's porous and volatile borders. It is the site of one of the most famous speeches in Israeli history, one, like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, that has attained mythical national status, delivered in April 1956 by the revered Israeli military hero Moshe Dayan.

Serving at the time as the IDF chief of staff, Dayan had come to Nahal Oz to participate in four weddings scheduled the following day. A stage with flowers and branches had been set up in the kibbutz for the huppa—the traditional Jewish wedding canopy—and some of the food was already being prepared. After his arrival, Dayan had a chance encounter with Roi Rotberg, a handsome young officer who had moved to the kibbutz from Tel Aviv and was in charge of the small community's security team.

Early the next morning—the day of the weddings—Rotberg rode his horse out into a nearby field to scare off Arab infiltrators as he had done numerous times before. This time though, he did not return. The Arabs ambushed Rotberg, killed him, and then dragged his mutilated body into Gaza. Instead of weddings, the kibbutz had to prepare for a funeral. Dayan decided to stay and quickly wrote a eulogy that he delivered over Rotberg's freshly dug grave. Reading it after October 7 gives Dayan's words new meaning.

"Not from the Arabs of Gaza must we demand the blood of Roi, but from ourselves," Dayan said. "How our eyes are closed to the reality of our

fate, unwilling to see the destiny of our generation in its full cruelty. Have we forgotten that this small band of youths, settled in Nahal Oz, carries on its shoulders the heavy gates of Gaza, beyond which hundreds of thousands of eyes and arms huddle together and pray for the onset of our weakness so that they may tear us to pieces—has this been forgotten? For we know that if the hope of our destruction is to perish, we must be, morning and evening, armed and ready."

The lessons of 1956 were sadly not applied. On October 7 the IDF was not ready when Hamas breached its border and 170 terrorists infiltrated the Nahal Oz base. Instead, the powerful Israeli military was taken completely by surprise.

The Hamas attacks on October 7 were like nothing Israel had seen before. They were atrocities that the Jewish people thought were no longer possible, or at least—since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948—could no longer be perpetrated against it. After all, Israel had the mighty IDF, one of the best-trained and technologically advanced militaries in the world. It had Mossad and Shin Bet, two of the world's most advanced intelligence agencies, believed to be capable of instilling fear in the hearts of their adversaries. Israel is even said to possess nuclear weapons.

But despite all of this, more than 1,200 people were killed that day and another 251 were taken hostage by Hamas. It was, as Israeli president Isaac Herzog later said, the single day that the most Jews were killed since the Holocaust.

The story of the *tatzpitaniyot* is particularly shocking. In November, after fifty days of fighting, a little more than one hundred hostages were released from Hamas captivity during a temporary truce. All of those released were women and children. But five of the female soldiers were not set free and remained for more than another year—until January 2025—in captivity (one of the soldiers was rescued in late October 2023 by Israeli special forces and another was killed in captivity and her body was recovered by the IDF).

After the attack, some of the surviving soldiers revealed how they had filed reports and warnings to their commanders in the weeks preceding the invasion about suspicious activity along the border. One of the soldiers told how she and her fellow observers had watched Hamas fighters train for an assault against Nahal Oz on an exact scaled model of their own position.

Other *tatzpitaniyot* told of Hamas men rehearsing attacks against armored vehicles modeled after the IDF's Merkava tank. Some had seen Hamas fighters in the weeks before the assault digging holes and placing explosives along the border. Over a period of several weeks, the soldiers reported, the Hamas training significantly increased: if it was once a week in August, it was twice a week by September, and eventually several times a day.

Some in the IDF believe that had the female soldiers' warnings been heeded, the attack on October 7 might never have happened.

Usually, information gathered by *tatzpitaniyot* makes its way up the chain to intelligence officers in the Southern Command and eventually to the Tel Aviv headquarters of Military Intelligence—better known in Israel by its Hebrew acronym Aman. But according to the accounts of several of the soldiers who were stationed at Nahal Oz, their reports were ignored. They were told by their commanders that everything was fine and that they should just keep watching their computer screens.

What happened in reality was that Hamas had put Israel to sleep, and the reports by the *tatzpitaniyot* simply did not match the *conceptzia*—a Hebrew word that every Israeli has learned since October 7 and which refers to the overarching conception and prevalent assessment within the IDF, the intelligence community, and the government of what Hamas was planning. Israel's political and military leadership assumed that Hamas had been deterred and wanted quiet, and as a result, the leadership viewed everything through that prism. Anything that fell outside that line of thinking was either ignored or reinterpreted so it could match the *conceptzia*.

Hamas's declaration of war on Israel was understood as a decision stemming from several changes in the Middle East. First was the Abraham Accords, at which moderate Sunni states—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco—normalized relations with Israel in 2020. Second was the moves that Saudi Arabia, the regional superpower, was making toward normalizing relations with Israel by the end of 2023. The Egyptians and Jordanians had abandoned Hamas, and the Palestinian cause had fallen off the world's agenda.

Yahya Sinwar, the ruthless Hamas leader who planned the attack, seemed to realize that the Palestinians were playing a military game of

ping-pong with the State of Israel—the almost annual rounds of violence with the IDF were not leading anywhere, and if a thousand Israelis had been killed over the last decade, about five times as many had been killed on the Palestinian side. He wanted to change the equation.

Hamas's ideology was clear before October 7. There was no need for classified intelligence: Hamas was training out in the open while calling for Israel's destruction. But the Israeli intelligence community preferred to ignore what it was seeing and hearing, believing that the situation was more complex.

In this book we attempt to understand how this happened. How did Israel fall asleep? How did it miss all of the signs of what Hamas was planning? And how did the IDF and its sophisticated technology along the border fail to stop the infiltration?

Just as important though is the why—why did all of this happen? For that we will look deeper, beneath the surface, at the intentions, the ideologies, and the ambitions of consecutive Israeli decision-makers.

In our work on this book, we have come to believe that on October 7 Israel suffered from three tactical failures and one massive, and almost unprecedented, strategic failure. There was the intelligence blindness that missed what Hamas was planning; there was the collapse of Israeli defensive measures along the border that had been created to stop attacks of this kind; and there was the unpreparedness of the outnumbered and outgunned Israeli forces stationed along the border.

All of these mechanisms failed on October 7, and Israel paid an unimaginable price, one that pushed it into a regional war that spread to Lebanon and Iran and was unlike anything the Jewish state had experienced in its seventy-six-year history. That is saying something for a country that has fought a war every decade since it was established.

For Israelis, the most immediate comparison was to the bloody debacle of the Yom Kippur War, the 1973 conflict that broke out with a surprise invasion by Syria and Egypt on the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Israel would go on to lose twenty-six hundred soldiers in the three-week war, but the difference was that in 1973, Israel pushed back the Egyptians and the Syrians and went on to achieve a decisive victory. By the middle of 2025, after more than a year and a half of war

against Hamas, a decisive victory still seemed far away, and many questioned whether it was even possible.

Nevertheless, the comparisons were still relevant. The Yom Kippur War came six years after Israel's lightning victory over Jordan, Egypt, and Syria in the Six-Day War. Israel was high on itself at the time and believed that its enemies were deterred, but, as in 2023, it failed to see the signs of what was happening. Yes, it ended up holding on to its territory, but the war shattered the nation's confidence and traumatized its citizens.

Leading up to October 7, Israel also believed that it was invincible. It was less than a year after the country had held its fifth election in three years, and, due to a government-initiated judicial reform, it was more divided and polarized than at any point in its nearly eight decades of statehood.

Israel was missing all of the signs, mostly since it believed that Hamas was incapable of such an assault. It could not have been more wrong.

While many around the world compared the Hamas invasion on October 7 to the 9/11 attacks against the United States—President Joe Biden noted that the October 7 casualty toll was the equivalent of fifteen 9/11 attacks—it was in some ways more of a Pearl Harbor moment for the State of Israel.

Like the United States at Pearl Harbor, Israel was taken completely by surprise when thousands of Hamas terrorists—many armed to the teeth—infiltrated Israel. Hamas didn't use even a single tunnel on October 7. Every fighter crossed the border above ground, something that Israeli military planners never imagined was possible.

Before Pearl Harbor, the United States knew what was happening in Europe and the Pacific theater. Israel also knew what Hamas was doing in Gaza. And like the United States, Israel did almost everything it could to avoid a war.

And just as Pearl Harbor changed the calculus for the United States when the war came home on the fateful day in December 1941, the events of October 7, 2023, changed the calculus for Israel, which decided—after years of trying to contain Hamas—that what was could no longer be.

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When we think about why October 7 happened, many answers present themselves. Israel knew that Hamas was building up an army yet refrained from initiating war because of a desire for peace and quiet. It is a desire that Israelis have shared since the country was first established, and the Jewish community there—which numbered barely six hundred thousand people—was struck by war on every possible front. Every war that Israel has fought has had its mistakes. But the desire of Israelis to achieve peace never faded. It is how the country was able to sign a treaty with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994, and how it negotiated with Syria through the 1990s, and has been struggling to find a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians even before it signed the Oslo Accords at the White House in 1993.

This desire has led to something else—a willingness to contain threats and refrain from preemptive action that could lead to a wider war. This policy is what led consecutive Israeli governments to watch Hezbollah amass weapons in Lebanon, going from just about 20,000 rockets during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 to over 150,000 by 2023, many of which were unleashed when the Lebanese terrorist group also began attacking Israel in solidarity with Hamas following October 7. Over the years, Israel monitored the weapons smuggled into Lebanon and Gaza, but it decided to maintain a policy of waiting. Consecutive governments knew the threats were growing, but if each could do its part to stave off conflict—even if just for a short time—they believed it was worth it.

An illustration of this policy of containment was seen in 2019 when Hezbollah threatened Israel in retaliation for an alleged Israeli drone strike in Lebanon a week earlier. Fearing an attack, the IDF cleared its border bases of troops and parked an empty jeep near a farming community just along the border with Lebanon. Hezbollah operatives waiting in ambush took the bait and fired an anti-tank missile at the jeep.

What the IDF did next would have put some Hollywood producers to shame: soldiers were loaded onto stretchers, and they were then medevaced to Rambam Health Care Campus in Haifa to unload the “wounded,” whose bloody gashes were wrapped in bandages. Everything was filmed, and pictures quickly circulated on social media.

However, no one was actually wounded—the blood and bandages were fakes. But by the time knowledge of the ruse became public, Hezbollah

leader Hassan Nasrallah had decided that his act of revenge had been successful, and there was no need for more attacks.

It was a brilliant move, and it spared Israel a wider escalation of hostilities. But it came at a price. The generals and politicians read the intelligence reports and knew about the weapons buildup on the other side of the border, but they were in love with acts of deception and believed that this policy could continue to keep Israel safe.

What happened that day in 2019 along the border with Lebanon had been the Israeli policy for the Gaza Strip for the last twenty years. We were both serving as military reporters when Israel pulled out of Gaza in 2005 and handed over the keys to the Palestinian Authority. We attended briefings and tours of the Israeli-Gaza border where the most senior defense officials in the country told us that if the Palestinians fired even one single rocket, Israel would retaliate with unprecedented force.

But that never happened. The moment Israel pulled out and redeployed along new defensive lines, it did everything it could to contain the threat inside Gaza. In the years since the 2005 withdrawal, Israel has launched an average of one operation every two years. But each time, it has done so reluctantly—only sending in the IDF after a public outcry that was too loud for the prime minister to ignore.

But even then, the IDF always stopped short of going all the way and toppling Hamas. Sometimes it only hit Hamas from the air, and other times it didn't even target Hamas, instead solely focusing on Islamic Jihad under a belief that it could keep Hamas out of the conflict (like Operation Black Belt in 2019 or Operation Breaking Dawn in 2022).

As we discuss later in the book, when the IDF's Southern Command uncovered Hamas's operational plan for a major raid on Israel in 2022, the plan was dismissed as nothing more than a prop. This should have been the moment when the IDF pressed the political leadership to preemptively strike Hamas and dismantle its military capabilities. But that didn't happen. Both the IDF and the government were caught in a dangerous complacency, believing that Hamas was more interested in a long-term truce and economic stability than in war.

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Take the story of Brigadier General Yisrael Shomer. Commander of the 146th Division in the Northern Command, Shomer lived in Kfar Aza, one of the kibbutzim assaulted by Hamas on October 7. He had returned home on Friday from his base to the north for the holiday weekend, leaving his military-issued M16 rifle on base. When the sirens went off and his kibbutz came under attack, Shomer took a kitchen knife, went outside in his gym clothes, fought, got his hands on a weapon, and helped save his home.

Shomer lived along the border with Gaza, one of the most volatile fronts in the world, but for some reason he did not think that he would need his M16. Even the most senior of officers in the IDF simply did not believe a Hamas invasion was possible.

As Shomer and the rest of Israel learned, though, in the intelligence world you only know what the enemy wants you to know. Capabilities are always the easier category in intelligence to quantify. You can count warheads, missiles, soldiers, and tanks. Intentions, though, are much harder to predict. It means getting into someone's head.

Israel may think it knows its enemy's intentions, but it was deceived and found the opposite to be happening on October 7. That is the story this book tells.

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There is no sugarcoating the depth of the failures surrounding October 7. Israel was unprepared that day and subsequently dragged into a bloody, long, and multifront war that changed much more than the Middle East; some would say it has changed the world.

In trying to understand how and why October 7 happened, we go back to the point of origin, when Hamas was first created. We look at the signs that were already evident then, how they were missed, and why.

We then look back at the different attempts and plans that emerged over the years to eliminate Hamas leadership. We examine the political decisions that were made over the years and how and why Israel believed it could keep Hamas quiet.

We continue by covering the first days of the ground offensive into Gaza. While it is true that the military leadership failed to accurately assess the level of Hamas resistance that Israel was going to face, it is also true

that Israelis did not fully appreciate the IDF ground forces and understand what they were capable of. In the years preceding the war, IDF ground forces had been delegitimized by senior military and government officials who claimed that Israeli infantry and armor would not be capable of achieving their objectives.

And while the war suffered from a lack of strategic planning and gross political interference, the IDF proved its reputation as a powerful fighting force. Yes, it failed on October 7 in a way that can never be forgotten, but it recovered, fought back, and, in every battle, defeated its enemy.

In the end, all the questions of how and why have answers, and everything can be rationalized and justified. Israel wanted to break the cycle of violence, to avoid war, and to grow its economy. Israelis wanted a Western-style existence, one of leisure, travel, and high quality. But it forgot something basic—Israel is not in Europe or South America. It is in the Middle East and surrounded by Arab enemies, many dedicated to a single goal—destroying the world's only Jewish state.

This is why the toughest question we encountered during the work on this book is not how October 7 happened but how Israel can ensure it does not happen again, and how the country can avoid falling into a containment trap down the road.

It is why we offer recommendations to the government and the military—some with structural and substantive reforms—that we believe will prevent Israel and the IDF from falling again into a strategic slumber. But if war does come again, our suggestions will allow Israel to be better prepared for its challenges.

The Israeli government and military failed the people of Israel on October 7, 2023. We need to make sure that this does not happen again.

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As journalists, we have been covering Israel's military for more than twenty years, chronicling its successes and its failures. We have strong criticisms of Israel and do not hesitate to convey them out of deep concern for our country and its future.

The war in Gaza is unlikely to be Israel's last war, and as Iran continues to pursue a nuclear capability and stoke mayhem and chaos

throughout the region with impunity, the question of the next battle is one of “when” and not “if.” Future governments in Israel will need to be reminded constantly of what went wrong in the lead-up to October 7 and how it cannot be allowed to happen again.

Nevertheless, there will be readers who will accuse us of bias, partiality, and a lack of compassion for the loss of life and destruction in Gaza.

We obviously have strong opinions on the matter, and while we recognize the pain and suffering of Palestinian civilians in Gaza as well as the tragedy that has unfolded there, Hamas, in our view, is to blame. There was a ceasefire on October 6 and Hamas violated it by invading Israel to slaughter and abduct its people. Israel did what any country would do and what many have done before it—it went to war to resecure its borders, degrade and eliminate its enemy, and bring back its people who were stolen from their beds. As we will show later in the book, Israel did this in a way not seen before in the history of war, taking unprecedented steps to minimize the loss of civilian life.

This book is a journey just like the one Israel has been on since it was founded as a state. We start the story at the beginning—on the night of October 6.

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How Did This Happen?

Yoav Gallant woke up early on October 7. As Israel's defense minister, he did not have many days off, and those that he did were almost always interrupted by some crisis. Israel was never lacking in crises.

It was the last day of the weeklong Sukkot holiday that commemorates the miraculous protection God provided the Israelites when they left Egypt. This particular day was Simchat Torah, which marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings.

There was no need to go into the office that day, and Gallant was sipping his first coffee of the morning, catching up on the little news that trickled in while walking around his home in the small town of Amikam in northern Israel.

His house, a sprawling mansion built to resemble the grandeur of ancient Crusader fortresses with domes and an internal courtyard, sat among old olive trees that had seen generations pick from their branches.

A dozen years earlier, the house had cost Gallant his appointment as the IDF chief of staff. In 2011, after an illustrious thirty-four-year career in the IDF, Gallant, who served at the time as head of Israel's Southern Command and had led with distinction Israel's version of the Navy SEALs, had been selected as Israel's next chief of staff by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Gallant was an outside-the-box candidate, but Netanyahu wanted him since he believed he would be tough on Iran and would work to stop its nuclear program—the prime minister's number-one priority.

After the appointment was announced, though, news got out about the house. Beyond its opulence, Gallant had allegedly built an unauthorized access road and planted an olive grove that spilled over the boundaries of his property. After an injunction was filed, the attorney general told Netanyahu that he could not defend Gallant's appointment, and the prime minister decided to rescind it.

But that was in the past. In January 2023, Gallant finally reached the fourteenth floor of IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv. He sat not in the chief of staff's office that he felt had been stolen from him but just down the hall, in the sprawling office of the defense minister.

The evening before, on October 6, the house had been alive with the warmth of a Friday night Shabbat dinner. Gallant and his family had hosted a group of lone soldiers—troops whose families live overseas—for the festive meal. On Saturday, he had woken up early, donned his cycling clothes, and was getting ready for a bike ride in the fields nearby.

As he was about to leave the house though, his daughter called from her apartment in Tel Aviv. "Dad, there are sirens going off," she said. "Rockets are flying here and the sirens aren't stopping."

Amikam was more than forty miles north of Tel Aviv. Gallant hadn't heard a thing.

Gallant was surprised. He had spoken with his military staff the day before, and there was no intelligence that something was amiss. All of the intelligence briefings he attended ahead of the holiday concluded that the situation was under control and that none of Israel's many enemies was planning an attack. He opened WhatsApp on his phone and called the IDF chief of staff, Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi.

"What is happening in Tel Aviv?" Gallant asked. Halevi's response was terse. "Rockets have been launched toward Tel Aviv. There are other incidents along the Gaza Strip border, but the situation appears to be much more serious." With that, the conversation ended. A seasoned commander, Gallant understood that something big was happening. He went back to his bedroom, changed clothes, threw some extra shirts and pants in a bag, and headed to the Defense Ministry. He knew that he would not be returning home for a long time—weeks, perhaps even longer.

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When Gallant returned to the Defense Ministry earlier that year, it was supposed to be his sweet revenge. For twelve long years, he had been absent from the IDF's central command structure. Now he was back.

But in the ten months since his return and up until October 7, Gallant had found an IDF General Staff that seemed blinded by the relative calm. The IDF's focus was on maintaining quiet while preparing for a possible standoff one day with Iran and Hezbollah. There was no operational plan for a full-scale offensive in Gaza, and no detailed strategy of what to do in the event of a war.

When Gallant replaced Benny Gantz as defense minister—Gantz was the general chosen to fill the role of chief of staff in 2012 in place of Gallant—no one mentioned anything about a possible attack from Gaza. The consistent message from Gantz, Netanyahu, and even Halevi was the same: Hamas was deterred and was more interested in economic prosperity for Gaza than in a military confrontation with Israel. He heard the same from Israel's top intelligence officials—the head of Aman, Major General Aharon Haliva, and Shin Bet director Ronen Bar.

Yet as Gallant was now beginning to realize, these assessments were dangerously naive.

Ahead of Simchat Torah, Gallant decided to pay a surprise visit to Sderot, the southern city most associated with Hamas attacks, having suffered for years from rockets launched from Gaza. In Sderot, he summoned Colonel Haim Cohen, commander of the Northern Gaza Brigade, which is deployed along the border, for a briefing. Cohen said nothing about a possible Hamas attack, and when they stood on a nearby hill looking deep into Gaza, everything seemed calm.

It was an area Gallant knew well from his years as head of the Southern Command, where he served from 2005 to 2010. During that time he had come the closest of all the commands to toppling Hamas's regime when he oversaw Israel's largest ground offensive ever in Gaza back in 2009. Everyone knew that Hamas was amassing weapons there, but Israel was focused on Iran and Hezbollah, which were believed to be greater and more immediate threats.

By 8:00 A.M., Gallant was in Tel Aviv. Heading straight to the Kirya, the military headquarters at the entrance to the city, he went down to the fortified underground command center known by its Hebrew name, Bor

(pit), and convened the top military brass for an initial update. The situation was bad, and the IDF did not really know what was happening. It was complete chaos. Bases were offline, a sign that they had been infiltrated. Residents of the nearby kibbutzim had received orders from security authorities to enter and lock their safe rooms after armed terrorists on motorbikes were seen driving through their quiet towns.

No one knew yet what exactly was happening, but Gallant had heard enough. His first move was decisive—he declared war, ordering the immediate mobilization of all available reserve forces, the reinforcement of the southern and northern borders, and the reduction of bureaucracy to ensure that weapons depots were wide open and military assets were rapidly deployed.

It was the right move, but it was too late, and in truth, the real drama had begun a day earlier—on October 6 at 2:00 P.M.

★ ★ ★

On Friday afternoon, while most IDF commanders were preparing for the holiday weekend, IDF chief Halevi convened a group of senior officers on the military's secure phone line to review what was expected that weekend.

Unlike Gallant, Halevi's path to chief of staff was pretty much paved for him. Named after his uncle Herzl, who was killed in the Six-Day War, Halevi grew up in Jerusalem in a politically connected family. His father was a prominent member of the Likud branch in the city and served on the city council. When his time came to enlist, Halevi joined the Nahal Infantry Brigade, switched to the Paratroopers Brigade, and was then moved over to Sayeret Matkal, the IDF's most elite commando unit, which he would eventually lead.

A former head of the Southern Command and Aman, Halevi was an officer of the big army but also of the special forces, well versed in the difference between the two and how to get the best out of a large force or just a few good men. He also knew the importance of having intelligence agencies work together. As head of Aman from 2014 to 2018, he oversaw the signing of a memorandum of understanding between that agency and Shin Bet that clarified responsibility over different areas as well as the allocation of resources.

On the phone call that afternoon, the consensus was that nothing was out of the ordinary. Intelligence officials reported no unusual activity, save for the attempted smuggling of an advanced anti-tank missile system from Sinai into Gaza and the ongoing effort to thwart it. Engineering forces from the IDF's Gaza Division had placed concrete blocks to protect the road to Kibbutz Nahal Oz from anti-tank missile fire—a precaution that would soon prove tragically inadequate as, the next day, October 7, terrorists simply hopped over the blocks with amazing ease.

By the time the call finished, and Halevi did not yet know this, Brigadier General Yossi Sariel, commander of Unit 8200—the IDF's premier signal-collection unit revered within Israel and beyond for intelligence capabilities that rivaled those of America's NSA—had received some disturbing news: a system that monitors activities in the Gaza Strip had crashed.

This was not just another system (its official name remains classified). It was designed to identify anomalies in Gaza, using advanced algorithms to detect anything out of the ordinary in the crowded Palestinian enclave. Apparently, it had crashed a number of times over the previous twenty-four hours, and efforts were underway to get it back up and running. Personnel had been scrambled back to base from their holiday breaks, but in the meantime, the system, crucial for detecting possible attacks, remained down. It was also a problem for Shin Bet, which has access to the alerts that the system gives off as well as to another system through which all intelligence collected by Israel's services regularly flows.

On the one hand, the system crashing was a red flag that something strange was happening. On the other hand, it was a delicate system that often crashed. Nevertheless, some senior defense officials, a full year after October 7, suspected that the malfunctions were not a coincidence but rather the result of a sophisticated cyberattack that included intentional power outages to blind Israeli surveillance.

While the IDF was continuing with its holiday, at 10:00 P.M., Shin Bet received a troubling alert on one of its own systems. Dozens of senior Hamas military operatives in Gaza had activated mobile devices with Israeli SIM cards, causing a dramatic spike in call traffic. Shin Bet, long aware of Hamas's tactic of using Israeli SIM cards to evade detection, understood the potential threat and passed on the information to the IDF Southern

Command. The fear was that Hamas was getting ready for an attack and had activated the SIM cards so that the terrorists being sent to breach the border would have a way to communicate with commanders in Gaza even after crossing into Israel.

The Shin Bet commanders in charge of the south called Major General Yaron Finkelman, head of the Southern Command, while he was on vacation with his family up in the north. Finkelman had taken up the mantle of the Southern Command three months earlier and was still learning the ropes. He decided not to take any chances; cutting his weekend break short, he began the drive back to Beersheba in the south, the location of the command's headquarters.

On the one hand, the activation of the SIM cards was strange. The phones were all on and were not shutting off. On the other hand, this was not the first time that they had been turned on. Months after the attacks, Shin Bet presented findings from its initial investigation into the night of October 6 and revealed that on Thursday, October 5, some of the SIM cards had also been turned on, but only for a short period of time before quickly being turned off. In addition, the Shin Bet system showed that the same exact SIM cards had been activated exactly one year earlier on October 7, 2022, and nothing had happened. Shin Bet officials figured that the 2023 activation of the SIM cards was likely an annual test, even though there were two significant differences to the 2022 occurrence—the number of SIMs was much greater, and the phones were scattered across the Gaza Strip and not located in one specific area.

Halevi received a general update about the SIM cards without the complete backstory of how it might be an annual test and was ordered to absorb the information but not to spread it too wide and jeopardize the source. Officers were instructed not to write anything down and not to leave a trace. This cautious approach effectively tied the hands of the Southern Command and the Gaza Division, preventing them from reinforcing their positions or making defensive moves that might tip off Hamas that Israel was aware that something was happening and thus preventing the assault.

In hindsight, the chief of staff's approach might have been overly cautious. Had he not tied the Gaza Division's hands, it is possible that deploying additional tanks along the border or dispatching two more attack helicopters could have been enough to signal to Hamas that Israel was

aware that the group was planning a border attack. It might have been enough to get Hamas to reconsider its plans for the following morning.

★ ★ ★

It was a tense night. Most of the officers read into the intelligence went to sleep slightly more anxious than they were hours earlier, but no one thought that anything big was about to happen. It wasn't that the IDF did not have forces deployed along the border. Yes, it was a holiday, and yes, it was Saturday, but the IDF was always on alert along a volatile border like Gaza. Special observation posts along the border were manned twenty-four hours a day, and nearby air force assets were ready to scramble with just one word.

Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar was trying to get some sleep at his home in a Tel Aviv suburb when his assistant called at 2:00 A.M. on October 7. A thirty-year veteran of Israel's counterterrorism agency, Bar was used to calls in the middle of the night, but this one was different. The information was vague, yet ominous. "There is an unclear preparation by Hamas for something," his assistant told him.

In addition to the SIM card alert four hours earlier, Hamas operatives were apparently preparing an underground tunnel complex that top field commanders descended into in the event of an emergency. Bar asked the assistant if he knew if the commanders were in the bunker complex.

"Not yet," he answered.

Based on the initial intelligence, it seemed that the move into the complex was part of a Hamas training exercise, one of many that the group had carried out in the previous year.

Nevertheless, Bar couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. Despite reassurances that the bunker preparations were likely nothing unique, he decided to head to Shin Bet headquarters in north Tel Aviv to dig deeper and be ready. *Just in case*, he told himself.

Bar, who sports a crew cut and gray stubble, started his military career as a fighter in Sayeret Matkal, participating in numerous covert operations, including the 1989 abduction of Sheikh Abdel Karim Obeid, a senior Hezbollah figure. Obeid was a spiritual leader and Hezbollah commander in southern Lebanon and had been involved in the kidnapping of several

foreign nationals there. Israel abducted him with the hope that he had intelligence on Ron Arad, an Israeli air force (IAF) navigator who went missing in Lebanon a few years earlier. He was returned to Lebanon in 2004.

When he finished his military service, Bar opened a coffee shop in Tel Aviv called "Café Baghdad" in recognition of the country that was perceived as Israel's greatest enemy at the time. It was a popular hangout spot for writers and musicians, but Bar wanted more from life. Five years later, he joined Shin Bet.

Now his instincts were on high alert. On his way to the office, he sent a message summoning a number of top Shin Bet officials who were responsible for Gaza and the West Bank to a conference call at 3:30 A.M. Despite intelligence indicating that what was happening was most likely a military exercise, Bar feared a more sinister plot—perhaps a Hamas attempt to cross the border and try to kidnap a few soldiers. The greater fear on his mind was that if this happened, Palestinian terrorist groups in the West Bank as well as Hezbollah and Iran might also get involved.

The head of Shin Bet was informed that the intelligence had been passed on to the Southern Command and the Gaza Division. They could now check their systems and sources to see if they could find anything else to complete the puzzle.

As Bar made his way to the office, Shin Bet analysts were busy poring over the information they had to see if there was anything fresh. One mentioned some intelligence that had just been received in which it was mentioned that Hamas was removing the protective fabric from some of its rocket launch pits, a step that preceded a rocket attack. An hour later, though, Shin Bet received new intelligence in which Hamas was insisting that removal of the fabric was merely part of a drill.

In hindsight, it became clear that even more intelligence got "stuck" within Aman and never reached the top IDF brass or Shin Bet. One important detail, for example, was that in the days leading up to October 7, there was a surge in Hamas communication traffic—phone calls and messaging more than doubled. No one brought this crucial detail, along with other pieces of information, to the attention of Halevi, Finkelman, or the head of the IDF's Operations Directorate, Major General Oded Basiuk, a veteran tank commander, at any point throughout the night.

The clock was ticking, but there were still no changes on the Israeli side. In the meantime, Finkelman arrived at his office in Beersheba and convened a 2:30 A.M. conference call with the head of the Gaza Division, Brigadier General Avi Rosenfeld, and a few top officers from Aman.

Rosenfeld, a former special forces operator, had taken up command of the Gaza Division a year earlier. The division's responsibility is to secure the border and prevent infiltrations and terrorist attacks. At his incoming ceremony, Rosenfeld stressed that he was well aware of the huge responsibility on his shoulders.

"Before our eyes are always those we have sworn to protect: the wonderful people living here in the communities along the Gaza border—in the excellent city of Sderot, and alongside it, in the kibbutzim and moshavim, where people work the land down to the last furrow. These are the communities that continue to grow and thrive despite all the challenges and threats," Rosenfeld said.

On the call with Finkelman, though, none of the officers reported anything unusual—no specific warning they had of an imminent attack or anything else that would explain what Hamas was doing.

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At 3:00 A.M., Basiuk, the IDF operations chief, and his number two in the directorate, Brigadier General Shlomi Binder, spoke by phone to start thinking about what operational changes, based on the intelligence that had been collected until that point, they might need to make to the forces that were already deployed along the border. They discussed whether they should send aircraft over the border, put more on standby, or alert additional ground forces, among other possibilities. Basiuk made the important point during the conversation that whatever they did, it would have to be done without Hamas knowing. The IDF directive was not to let Hamas know that Israel knew what it knew—firstly to avoid burning sources and secondly to avoid raising panic within Hamas, thereby pushing it to attack when it wasn't even thinking of doing so.

This delicate balancing act without tipping off the other side is a constant challenge in the world of military intelligence. For instance, if the IDF discovers a plot by Hamas and adjusts its force posture in a way that

signals Israel's awareness, it could inadvertently lead Hamas to do some reverse engineering and uncover Israel's source of the tip-off. Worse, Hamas might accelerate its plans, mistakenly believing that Israel intends to strike first. The risk is not just about revealing information but potentially triggering the very conflict both sides are trying to avoid.

For this reason, Halevi and his men were cautious in these initial hours. If this was real, they wanted to be ready, but if it wasn't and it was just a drill as some of the intelligence analysts assumed, then they did not want to tip off Hamas that they knew anything about it.

A few minutes after the Basiuk-Binder call, a new assessment came in from Aman and Shin Bet noting that similar events had taken place in the last few months and that what was happening appeared to be a drill. Basiuk's office tried unsuccessfully to get some of the Aman and Shin Bet authors of the assessment on the phone to ask a few questions.

It was at this point that Major General Aharon Haliva, the head of Aman, got his first update of the night. His assistant, N, a colonel, had spoken with the Southern Command's chief intelligence officer. He called Haliva to tell him about the alerts, the different conversations that were going on within the Operations Directorate, and how it seemed like a Hamas drill—no one he had spoken with had expressed a sense of urgency. Haliva was on vacation with his family in the Red Sea resort town of Eilat. He went to sleep thinking that he would wake up early to go for a jog along the beach.

"If there is anything, I will wake you up," N told Haliva before they ended the call.

At around 3:20 A.M., the chief of staff, Halevi, convened the first high-level phone conversation with members of his General Staff. While he waited for Finkelman and Basiuk to join the call, he pulled out a piece of paper on the desk of his home office and wrote to himself: "Don't convince yourself that this is nothing." It was his way of warning himself not to be complacent. When the other officers joined the call, they reviewed the intelligence. At the worst, the officers suggested, based on the intelligence they had, there would be one or two attacks along the border road. Nothing came up on the call that even hinted at what was about to take place in a mere three hours. Halevi decided not to go back to sleep. He spent the next hour at his desk, issuing orders to various commanders. At one point he had

a feeling that maybe what was happening were signs of a potential plan to launch an attack in the West Bank. He called up the Central Command, the regional command responsible for the West Bank, and ordered them to reinforce troop numbers near the Cave of the Patriarchs in the volatile mixed Jewish-Palestinian city of Hebron.

Shin Bet and Aman were far from grasping the full extent of what was being finalized at that exact moment in Hamas command centers throughout the Gaza Strip. Out of the thousands of Hamas operatives getting ready to raid the border, there was not a single Israeli spy among them or source who could tip off handlers that something was happening, the result of Israeli neglect in recruiting human assets in the years before.

After the call with Halevi, Basiuk, the IDF operations chief, held another call with his deputy, Binder. Both were still at home, and Basiuk stressed that Rosenfeld, the Gaza Division commander, was up-to-date on the details and that it was worth briefing a few more members of the IDF General Staff so they were aware of what was happening. Binder confirmed that the commander of the air force had been briefed, as had several top officers in Aman, as well as the head of intelligence in the navy just to be on the safe side. Basiuk also instructed Binder to give the Southern Command approval to call up any needed reinforcements.

Meanwhile, the Operations Directorate continued making calls to Aman and Shin Bet to clarify the intelligence and determine if there was anything new. There wasn’t.

Despite everything looking like this was a Hamas exercise, Finkelman, the Southern Command chief, decided to take a few precautions.

First, he ordered commanders of units that were deployed along the border to be on an extra-vigilant state of alert at dawn and to even leave their posts at 5:30 A.M. and move around so they could be seen. This only pertained to the soldiers who were already on guard duty. Everyone else in the frontline bases remained sleeping in their pajamas.

He also decided to take advantage of Basiuk’s authorization for reinforcements and requested that four unmanned aerial vehicles be dispatched over the Gaza Strip. Due to technical reasons, the IAF was only able to allocate two in the middle of the night. In addition, Finkelman also asked that the scramble time for attack helicopters be shortened and that a

pair of Apache Longbows be relocated from the Ramat David Base in northern Israel to the Ramon Base in the south.

But this did not happen. Someone in the air force independently decided to hold off on advancing the request through the chain of command until 8:00 A.M.

By 3:30 A.M., the Gaza Division, under Rosenfeld's command, was still operating under lax holiday conditions. This meant that the four battalions stationed along the Gaza border were bare-bones and that many of the commanders were home on holiday leave. Despite the warnings from Halevi not to do anything that would tip off Hamas that Israel knew something might be happening, Rosenfeld decided to recall a number of commanders to duty, including Colonel Haim Cohen, commander of the Northern Gaza Brigade, which is responsible for the northern section of the border.

Colonel Assaf Hamami, commander of the Southern Gaza Brigade, was spending the holiday with his six-year-old son Alon on base, and his wife and other children were supposed to join them that morning. At the time, Rosenfeld believed that the brigades were prepared for the possibility of two simultaneous infiltrations and that the "dawn alert" would suffice.

An important note—IDF force posture is intelligence driven. In other words, the military, which is always short on forces, deploys what it needs along its different active fronts based on what the intelligence shows. Since the intelligence was slim, Rosenfeld didn't have much to work with, but he wanted everyone ready for any surprise that might be coming.

Months later, Rosenfeld would explain that at no point during the night did he know all of the details that other IDF officers had access to. The information he had received was vague and mentioned a general concern that Hamas might be planning an attack along the border. It was nothing close to the scale of what ended up happening when thousands of Palestinian fighters invaded Israel at dozens of different points.

No intelligence agency had warned the Gaza Division or Southern Command of the possibility of a massive Hamas operation. Rosenfeld later learned about a briefing that had been held two weeks earlier and was led by the division's intelligence officer but focused solely on Hamas's capabilities in the event of an attack. Not a word was said at the meeting about imminent Hamas plans to invade Israel.

As the minutes passed, Rosenfeld decided to update Colonel Eitan Paz, commander of the navy base in Ashdod responsible for protecting the Gaza coast, about the concern of a possible attack. Like in every other conversation, Rosenfeld stressed to Paz not to do anything that would tip off Hamas that Israel was on high alert.

On his own, Paz decided not to take any chances and deployed an additional Dvora-class fast patrol boat to the one that is always out at sea to repel a potential Hamas assault. This decision would later prove critical in mitigating a large-scale naval attack, which included seven Hamas vessels. Despite the interception of most of the Hamas force, two boats with twelve terrorists reached Israel's shore, where they murdered nineteen civilians—some camping and some there for early fishing—at the Zikim Beach just north of Gaza.

★ ★ ★

Through the night, Shin Bet and Aman continued trying to piece together the fragments of intelligence they were getting from Gaza. At about 3:45 A.M., soldiers in Unit 8200 received a new piece of intelligence indicating that Hamas might be preparing an attack, while *tatzpitaniyot*—the female surveillance soldiers—reported seeing a Hamas company commander near the border. Shin Bet continued to hear about the preparations that were being made to the top field commanders' underground bunkers while messages being intercepted in Gaza continued to indicate that it was all an exercise.

That was the question no one had a clear answer to—was this an exercise or was this war?

At 4:00 A.M., Bar convened his top staff for a consultation. Some of Shin Bet's senior officials had already gathered at headquarters, while others joined via secure remote video conference. The Shin Bet officials responsible for Gaza raised two possibilities: either Hamas was conducting another routine exercise, or it was preparing for a limited infiltration. Bar was uneasy and decided to dispatch Shin Bet's elite rapid-response unit "Tequila" to the Gaza border.

Tequila was established during the Second Intifada as Shin Bet's last resort in stopping terrorist attacks, and it has developed a unique expertise

in intercepting and engaging terrorists while it is on the move. Consisting of veterans of the IDF's most elite commando units, Tequila chose its name as a reference to quick, rapid shots with significant effect.

At 4:15 A.M., Halevi's office convened a second conference call with the Southern Command. Aman chief Haliva and other key intelligence officials were again not invited—officials explained that at the time it was not being deemed necessary. Basiuk, the operations chief, was not summoned to the call but asked to join just so he could listen in and hear the latest developments. The intelligence in those minutes still leaned toward the conclusion that Hamas was running a drill. Halevi and Finkelman decided on some minor adjustments to the forces deployed along the border as well as some defensive steps like summoning back to the border additional commanders who were still at home due to the holiday.

Halevi ended the call by saying that unless something changed, the group would gather again at 8:00 A.M. to review the latest intelligence and the decisions that were made throughout the night, and then reassess. The issue remained "open" and unresolved, and after the call, one of Halevi's assistants summarized it in writing and distributed the interim conclusions to the different participants.

At 5:15 A.M., the Tequila operatives had discreetly arrived at a section of Israel's northern border with Gaza, keeping their presence secret. Bar ordered them to remain in place on standby. Around the same time, the Southern Command's chief operations officer arrived at HQ in Beersheba and opened up the war room, unaware that in just over an hour Israel would be plunged into chaos.

At 5:40 A.M., Bar, the Shin Bet chief, started reviewing all of the intelligence again. Despite the lack of concrete evidence pointing to an imminent attack, he had a bad feeling that something catastrophic was about to happen. Since 3:45 A.M., though, there had been no new intelligence. Whatever was going to happen remained shrouded in mystery.

Meanwhile, in Aman, analysts who were watching their systems had nothing new to present. Brigadier General Amit Sa'ar, head of the Research Division, scheduled a call for 6:30 A.M. to prepare for the call with Halevi that was scheduled for 8:00.

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Years before, around the time that his son was studying at a premilitary academy in the Western Negev ahead of his compulsory service in the IDF, Bar had downloaded the Red Alert app to his phone. It provides real-time alerts every time a rocket, mortar, or missile is fired into the State of Israel. Bar, a father as much as a security chief, wanted to stay updated on any threat, even the slightest danger, that could come close to his son.

Even after his son enlisted, he kept the app on his phone. At 6:29 A.M. the app blew up as hundreds of rockets rained down on Israel from the Gaza border all the way to Tel Aviv. Bar muttered a curse under his breath, fearing right away that Hamas was using the rocket fire as cover to infiltrate Israel where it would try to kidnap soldiers. He immediately called Halevi. "Herzi, be careful that Hamas does not try to kidnap anyone," he warned.

Meanwhile, Rosenfeld, commander of the Gaza Division, was witnessing the horror unfold in real time. Reports from observation posts near the border were grim, and the images on the computer screens in his command center were even worse—Hamas terrorists were assaulting the border at multiple locations. The gravity of the situation hit him like a cold wave. He issued the order "Turkish Horsemen," sending a shiver through the bodies of sector commanders. It was a call to arms, signaling that terrorists had breached the Gaza border in multiple points and were heading toward outposts and nearby communities. It meant something simple—the Gaza Division needed immediate reinforcements and everyone had one job: repel the invading enemy forces.

The order was supposed to lead the General Staff in Tel Aviv to immediately dispatch every available soldier to the south. But Rosenfeld's call for help did not translate into action as quickly as it should have. A significant gap existed between the order's issue and its execution. Hours ticked by as the General Staff slowly absorbed the severity of the situation and moved to mobilize forces toward the Gaza Division.

Halevi got into his car and ordered the driver to take him to IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv. At one point he started to have second thoughts and considered heading to the border with Gaza when he received a phone call. It was Yisrael Shomer, the general who lived in Kfar Aza. He told the chief of staff that he was home and that Hamas terrorists were inside the kibbutz. "I have a knife and I am trying to get my hands on an M16," Shomer said. It was then that Halevi understood the full gravity of the

situation. He made his way to IDF HQ and ordered all of the other members of the General Staff to do the same. This was a war.

Postwar inquiries would later reveal the staggering success of Hamas's infiltration, with over three thousand terrorists crossing into Israel in more than sixty locations. They came in waves, under the cover of more than thirteen hundred rockets—the greatest number ever recorded on a single day since the founding of the Jewish state.

Rosenfeld followed up with a phone call to Binder from the Operations Directorate. "Send the entire IDF to the Gaza Division," he pleaded.

Rosenfeld was holed up in the division's command center—known by its Hebrew acronym Hamal—and was trying to piece together what was happening outside. Every moment brought new horrors, and the war was literally expanding right before his eyes. He tried to update commanders in the field as well as the IDF's top command, but the situation was spiraling out of control.

Hamami, the commander of the Southern Gaza Brigade, left his son in the care of a few soldiers and headed out to try to block the invasion. Accompanied by a handful of soldiers, Hamami reached the entrance to Kibbutz Nirim where he was fatally shot and his body was then abducted to Gaza.

It was total chaos. Rosenfeld tried to get Hamami on the phone but there was no answer. In the meantime, another senior officer from the brigade called in that he was wounded and lying in some ditch on the side of a highway, without a weapon.

Inside the Hamal, Cohen, the besieged commander of the Northern Gaza Brigade, struggled to understand what was happening across his sector. Every few seconds, another report came in about another gunfight somewhere in the area alongside urgent calls from residents of the kibbutzim who reported hearing gunfire just outside their front doors. Within half an hour, around 7:00 A.M., Finkelman and Rosenfeld learned about the Nova Music Festival, which was taking place near Kibbutz Be'eri. Thousands of Israelis had been there celebrating, and based on initial reports, terrorists—some on hang gliders—had reached the festival area and were shooting indiscriminately into the crowd.

It was then that the first combat helicopter, loaded with six missiles, arrived down south. Rosenfeld spoke directly to the pilot and ordered him

to fire on terrorists even if they were inside Israeli territory and near civilians at the festival. Twenty-five minutes later, the helicopter returned to base after using all its missiles. In the postwar investigation, Rosenfeld would reflect that ordering that strike, knowing civilians were at risk, was one of the hardest decisions he had to make that day.

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As the soldiers and commanders of the Gaza Division were literally fighting for their lives, Halevi and his senior staff at IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv were struggling to build a clear picture of what was happening to help make the right decisions. Every officer from the Gaza Division was trying to return to base, but the roads were death traps. Hamas squads hid behind cars on the main roads leading to the border area, ambushing anyone who came their way. Cars spun out of control, finally coming to a stop riddled with bullets. People who were driving down south that morning to attend the last day of the Nova Festival were stopped and murdered.

Rosenfeld was torn. As a former commander of the elite Shaldag Unit, he had a burning urge to go outside and fight. On the other hand, he knew that someone needed to stay back and try to gain control of the situation. He remained in the Hamal with a skeleton staff where he felt he could better direct forces to the nearby communities that were also now starting to come under attack.

A little after 7:10 A.M., though, the unthinkable happened. Terrorists breached the Gaza Division headquarters from multiple directions. Rosenfeld knew that if the Hamal fell, there would be no connection between the General Staff and what was happening in the field. One of the first to notice the infiltration was the division's chief tracker, a Bedouin officer who went by the nickname Mundar. He ordered his fellow trackers to come defend the gates to the base where they fought heroic battles for hours at point-blank range.

With Hamami missing, Finkelman made two critical decisions. First, he called the previous commander of the Southern Gaza Brigade and asked him to come as fast as he could to replace Hamami. Then, realizing that the Gaza Division had been overrun by hundreds of terrorists, he divided the

responsibility for its territory among several division commanders who had arrived to try to help stabilize the situation.

In those initial hours, the goal was clear: regain control of the border, stop the flow of terrorists into Israel, and clear the south of any terrorists who remained. For Finkelman, it was obvious that the IDF would soon be heading into Gaza, but first he had to stop the massacre.

While many officers and reservists started arriving individually to the area, it was not enough to stop the attack. The IDF needed full fighting units to make a difference. This lack of critical mass made it nearly impossible to organize a coordinated effort to clear the kibbutzim or the IDF bases of the terrorists. When the IAF finally regained its composure, it focused on attacking predesignated targets, including a tunnel leading from Gaza into Israeli territory—operations that were later deemed useless, as they had no effect on the murder spree that was taking place inside the kibbutzim. Those strikes did nothing to help the people who were being murdered, raped, and burned—most of which, according to postwar inquiries, occurred in the first four hours of the attack.

A little after 7:00 A.M., Basiuk, head of the Operations Directorate, called the prime minister's military secretary with a short message. "Tell the prime minister that this is a war," he said. He then ordered his staff to start the process of calling up the reserves, even though the IDF did not yet have authorization from the security cabinet. Basiuk knew that if he didn't start the process immediately, reservists would not get moving until the following day, and by then who knew what would be left of Israel, especially if Hezbollah in Lebanon decided to join the fight as he and Halevi both feared in those initial hours.

The chaos was so vast that even Netanyahu felt like he needed to hear firsthand what was happening. One of his advisers, he discovered, had a cousin—Elam Maor—who lived in Be'eri and was a member of the kibbutz's rapid response team. Maor had left his home that morning and was fighting to defend his family and his town.

The adviser called Maor, put the phone on speaker, and told him that the prime minister was listening.

"Be'eri is under attack by hundreds of terrorists," Maor said. "We are fighting with only a few people, the emergency squad, some of whom have already been killed. Hundreds of terrorists are now attacking Be'eri and

there is no one here to help. You must come here immediately with forces, right now." After a brief silence, Netanyahu replied: "I understand. It is being handled."

The problem was that it wasn't. Close to 400 Hamas men had infiltrated Be'eri, killing five members of the small response team alongside another 28 soldiers and police who had come to try to fend off the terrorists. In total, 101 members of the kibbutz were killed that morning and another 30 were taken to Gaza as hostages.

At 9:00 A.M., after a meeting inside the Bor with senior commanders, Gallant recorded a somber video message that his spokesperson released to the media: "Hamas made a grave mistake this morning and started a war against the State of Israel. IDF soldiers are fighting the enemy at all infiltration points. The State of Israel will win this war."

What Gallant didn't reveal was that his concern was skyrocketing. He feared that Hezbollah might be involved in the attack and that it too was planning its own surprise invasion. Later, intelligence found in Hamas headquarters revealed that the original plan had been to launch a simultaneous attack from both the north and the south.

Israel now believes that Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in Gaza and the mastermind of the October 7 attack, could not resist going first to claim the glory. He was apparently confident that even if he upstaged Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed group would still join the fray. Gallant knew that an attack from the north at the time that Israelis were being slaughtered in the south would be too much for the country. He declared a general mass mobilization of all military forces and reservists.

Despite the chaos, Gallant did not buckle under the pressure. His relationship with Halevi was strong, and as the war unfolded, Halevi became Gallant's primary ally in the face of the challenges that rapidly escalated—along Israel's borders, but also within the cabinet room where Halevi and Gallant came under constant fire from the various ministers as well as from Netanyahu himself.

When they arrived a few days later for a meeting at the prime minister's office, Gallant and Halevi were told that they could not bring their cell phones inside the building. Usually, cell phones are allowed in the building but not inside the cabinet room. Gallant's close team was certain

that Netanyahu's people were deliberately trying to make things difficult for the defense minister.

This tension with the prime minister that was evident already on October 7 was what helped Gallant decide to place his absolute trust in the IDF General Staff. Some of the generals were traumatized by the morning attack—the murder, the rape, and the hostage taking. Gallant knew that without placing his trust in the IDF brass, there was no way they would have the confidence to lead their troops into the battle that had now been forced upon Israel. Later, the united front between him and the generals was nicknamed the "October Alliance."

Toward midnight and after the south had finally started to come back under Israeli control, Gallant placed a call to US secretary of defense Lloyd Austin. He was worried about stockpiles and munition levels. Israel was going into a war the likes of which it had not known.

Gallant informed Austin that the United States had recently moved more than two hundred thousand artillery shells from stockpiles that the Americans kept in Israel to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia. Gallant urgently asked if fifty thousand shells could be returned immediately from Europe. After a brief check, Austin agreed. Gallant then called the CEO of Elbit, an Israeli defense company, and asked that he immediately set up shell production lines.

War had come, and Israel needed all the weapons it could get its hands on.

★ ★ ★

The country was in a total state of shock. It was like the Yom Kippur War all over again, when generals feared that Israel was about to be destroyed. The sense of helplessness was overwhelming.

Based on what the IDF found after the invasion, it was clear that the Hamas terrorists had planned to spend a long time inside Israel. In addition to their assault rifles, grenades and rocket-propelled grenades, the Hamas men came with medical equipment, devices that could be used to amputate limbs if needed, machetes, and more.

Documents found on the bodies of the terrorists included Israeli work permits but also maps of the kibbutzim and nearby IDF bases. Important

landmarks such as the location of the offices of senior IDF commanders within the bases, weapons depots, and medical clinics were highlighted. It was an illustration of how prepared Hamas had been before the attack and how it had succeeded in gathering intelligence on Israel.

One map of the Tel Nof Airbase showed the exact location of the different squadrons, the type of aircraft housed there, and the offices of the senior commanders. On the maps of Nahal Oz and Be'eri, for example, the locations of the dining rooms were highlighted. That was where the Hamas terrorists intended to gather the residents they were abducting before transferring them to Gaza.

Some of the terrorists were wearing a variant of a dog tag, which bore their name, picture, and ID number, like the type a conventional military force would wear. The attackers carried a small booklet with a list of phrases in Hebrew so they could communicate with the people they were abducting. Lines like "take off your clothes" and "children here, and women there" were transliterated into Arabic.

The documents also showed how Hamas battalion commanders had received the authority to write religious rulings—fatwas—so they could justify the barbaric tactics of rape, abuse of bodies, and more that were carried out against Israeli civilians and soldiers.

On the body of a Hamas commander whose force raided the city of Sderot, soldiers found a note that he had written claiming that, based on the Quran, the souls of his men will go directly to heaven. Some terrorists were found with notebooks that included statements by Abdullah Azzam, the al-Qaeda founder, who claimed that killing purifies the soul.

These documents formed the basis for understanding why a female soldier, for example, was shot twelve times, why women were systematically sexually assaulted, and why hostages were stabbed multiple times in their arms and legs. Hamas wanted its men unrestrained. They wanted a pogrom in the worst way possible.

It was why Hamas attackers smeared their blood-soaked hands on the walls of the houses of the abducted and murdered, leaving notes and graffiti threatening to return "next year."

It was an attack that was meant not just to kill and destroy but also to sow fear.

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Israel was now at war, but it was also trying to understand how this had happened. How had Israel been taken by surprise in this way by its weakest enemy? How had Aman and Shin Bet not understood that what happened the night of October 6 was not a drill but preparation for a massive invasion and murderous campaign? How did no one know what was going on just over the border?

As the shock of the attack and its aftermath—over 1,200 killed, and 251 taken hostage—began to settle, a disturbing truth emerged: Israel possessed all the intelligence to piece together Hamas's plans, but the IDF never connected it into a comprehensive picture to understand what was happening right before their eyes.

As if the feelings of helplessness and confusion weren't bad enough, on November 20, about five weeks into the war, a twenty-page booklet prepared by Aman and titled *Jericho Walls*, was placed on Gallant's desk at the Defense Ministry. As he flipped through the pages, Gallant was stunned. He had never seen or heard about the booklet, which detailed Hamas's meticulous planning for an invasion of Israel. What was even more shocking was that it had been written in 2022, a year before the attack, meaning that the preparations had been going on under the radar for at least that long. Either Israel was blind or someone had intentionally decided to ignore what was happening right before their eyes.

The document was written by the Gaza Division's intelligence team, which had been disturbed by the training exercises Hamas's military wing had been holding in the open, simulating raids on IDF posts and Israeli towns, even recording themselves as they kidnapped men dressed as soldiers. Hamas had been openly preparing for what they had just done.

Jericho Walls provided an almost exact summary of what had happened on October 7. The report did not specify a date for the attack but outlined a systematic assault aimed at overwhelming Israeli defenses and raiding towns and key military bases, including Gaza Division headquarters.

The document was presented to the head of the Southern Command at the time as well as to Haliva, the Aman chief who just a few weeks earlier had predicted that Israel would have five years of quiet in Gaza due to the

success of a recent IAF operation. Many wondered how he could have thought so with this document in his possession.

A few weeks later, another disturbing detail came out. In July, just three months before the Hamas invasion, a veteran Unit 8200 analyst had warned that Hamas was preparing for war. The analyst had watched as Hamas conducted a daylong training exercise that appeared similar to what had been outlined in the *Jericho Walls* report.

The analyst's reports were sent up the chain of command, but her IDF superiors dismissed them. Hamas, one officer told her, was just putting on a show. It had no interest in war and held these exercises to gain more concessions from Israel.

But the analyst pushed back. In a series of internal emails, she argued with her commanders, claiming that Hamas was training differently than in the past, that senior Hamas commanders were attending these drills, and that the terrorist fighters had received special religious decrees to be extraordinarily violent in a future war.

At the end of September 2023, the analyst finally felt like people were listening. The Gaza Division's intelligence officer held another discussion with top officials to review newly gathered intelligence and see where things stood with Hamas's training. A few days later, on Thursday, September 28, the intelligence officer distributed a document summarizing the discussion.

That Thursday was the last day of work before the IDF went on break for Sukkot. At 3:30 P.M. the Unit 8200 veteran analyst sent an email—again to a long list of recipients—with some of her comments, adding a quote, attributed to Sigmund Freud, at the end: "Before you diagnose yourself with depression or low self-esteem, first make sure that you are not, in fact, just surrounded by assholes."

Signing off with quotes was her usual shtick, but this one had a clear and direct message to her Aman colleagues who had doubted her report.

A few days later, Netanyahu convened a meeting with all of the different military and intelligence leadership. It was the middle of the Sukkot holiday, and some of the participants showed up at IDF HQ in Tel Aviv in jeans and T-shirts.

There was no mention of any Hamas plans to attack or raid the border. On the contrary—the general consensus was that Hamas was happy with

the continued monthly transfer of financial assistance that it was receiving from Qatar with Israel's blessing and was not interested in any type of escalation. The only person who raised some concern was Shin Bet chief Bar, who suggested that the IDF focus its efforts on neutralizing the Hamas headquarters in the West Bank, which, he said, was directing and financing terrorism against Israeli settlers.

Netanyahu was not overly concerned but told the participants that he did not want to be surprised. "I do not want to end up like Golda," he said, a reference to Golda Meir, the prime minister during the Yom Kippur War.

On the same day, Aman head Haliva flew to Europe for a work meeting. He returned late that night, and the next morning he decided to visit three of the IDF's most sensitive fronts to get his own firsthand look at what was happening on the ground.

He first flew to the 91st Division's headquarters along the Lebanese border, where he spoke about a potential raid by Hezbollah's elite Radwan force across the border and how the division was planning to prevent it. Although Hezbollah's attack plans against northern Israel were known, the Aman chief told his officers, they did not seem to be ripe. There was no urgency for the IDF to do anything at that moment.

From there, Haliva drove to the 210th Division along the border with Syria. Israel's main concern in this area was Iranian efforts to establish forward bases in Syria to create another potential conflict zone with Israel. Israel operated frequently against Syria, bombing targets almost every week, sometimes even daily, a contrast to their dealings with Lebanon.

Finally, he flew down to the Gaza Division, landing around 6:30 P.M. at Unit 8200's "Yarkon" base, not far from Gaza, where he held a ninety-minute discussion with about forty intelligence officials.

During the war, Haliva had time to reflect on where things went wrong on October 7. On the one hand, there was never a point—in the months leading up to war or on his visit just a few days prior to its initiation—where the intelligence showed that Hamas was about to attack or that catastrophe was just days away. No one in Aman, Shin Bet, or any other agency spoke up, grabbed him by the sleeve, pulled, and warned him that Gaza was about to explode. On the contrary—Gaza seemed relatively calm, with some indications that Hamas's leadership was focused on maintaining the status quo, particularly after the arrival of Qatari funds.

On the other hand, it was true that Israel always needed to be prepared for war. It was also always hunting two top Hamas operatives—Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif and Sinwar—and the government and IDF brass knew that if they ever attacked either of the two, there would be a lengthy conflict.

The intelligence also seemed to say as much. On Haliva's desk there were documents of decisions taken by the Hamas top council indicating that the group was not interested in war. The documents showed how the Qatari money was coming into Gaza as planned and how Sinwar had given instructions for Hamas to curb the weekly protests along the border.

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So where did things go wrong?

There were three levels to Aman's failure. First were the deep flaws in the way Israel thought it understood Hamas. Aman failed to grasp Hamas's true intentions and mistakenly believed that the organization's leadership wanted a truce rather than war. This miscalculation was shared by top foreign intelligence officials, who also believed that Sinwar was more focused on regional stability than on initiating a conflict with Israel.

Second, on an operational level, Israeli intelligence grossly underestimated the scale of Hamas's plan. Even if the IDF had prepared its forces according to the *Jericho Walls* plan, or if it had paid attention to the Unit 8200 analyst's emails, it still would not have been enough to respond to the size and scale of what Hamas threw at the border. Aman expected, at most, a conflict characterized by rocket fire and one or two tunnel infiltrations. Instead, it was met with a meticulously planned large-scale invasion involving thousands of operatives.

And third, on a tactical level, the IDF's assumptions about its defenses along the border were disastrously inaccurate. The so-called "iron wall" erected along the border at the cost of over $1 billion was believed to be impenetrable. The IDF was so confident in its border defenses that the military was certain that the only way Hamas could cross the border was by tunnel. On October 7, not a single terrorist used a tunnel.

Everything and everyone were just wrong.

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The writing had been on the wall for years. In May 2016, Avigdor Lieberman, one of Israel's hardline right-wing politicians, was appointed defense minister. Netanyahu's coalition had been a mere sixty-one seats—a one-seat majority—and bringing in Lieberman's party gave him some political breathing room.

The appointment surprised many in the country itself as well as leaders around the world. Just a month earlier, Lieberman had declared that "if I'm defense minister … I give [Hamas leader Ismail] Haniyeh forty-eight hours. Either return the bodies [of IDF soldiers captured in 2014] and the civilians [held in Gaza], or you're dead. As far as I'm concerned, reserve a plot for yourself in the nearest cemetery."

Haniyeh was not killed within that forty-eight-hour window. He would eventually be assassinated in July 2024, when his room at an Iranian government guesthouse in Tehran exploded, reportedly a Mossad operation. But just seven months after taking up the mantle of Israel's security, Lieberman wrote what would be the most damning report about Hamas ever put out by a defense minister. Dated December 21, 2016, and classified as "Top Secret," Lieberman's eleven-page *Assessment of the Situation in the Gaza Strip—The Position of the Minister of Defense* was distributed to Netanyahu, the IDF chief of staff at the time Gadi Eisenkot, and then-head of Aman Herzi Halevi.

Lieberman's paper showed the extent of the blindness within Israel's defense and political system and warned of the "grave mistake" it would be for Israel to delay a "preemptive strike" against Hamas beyond July 2017, predicting that such a delay could have consequences even more severe than the 1973 Yom Kippur War. He emphasized that Hamas intended to bring the next conflict onto Israeli soil, deploying significant and well-trained forces to capture an Israeli town, or perhaps several, and take numerous hostages—a move, he warned, that would shatter Israeli morale and undermine the country's standing in the region.

Lieberman stressed the importance of intensifying intelligence efforts and preparing the IDF for the possibility of an unplanned flare-up, noting that Hamas was building its military capabilities under the guise of calm.

Lieberman's document also revealed Hamas's long-term strategy, which, he wrote, was discussed during a series of meetings of senior Hamas

leaders in Qatar in September 2016, where they laid out the group's "liberation strategy." Among these leaders was Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh, whose goal was to destroy Israel by 2022. This intelligence was later corroborated by documents found by the IDF in Gaza following October 7, which indicated that Hamas had been preparing for war with Israel since at least the winter of 2022 and had repeatedly deliberated over the exact timing of the attack.

Lieberman's document also warned of Hamas's intention to increase its military force from twenty-seven thousand to forty thousand by 2020 (which it did), and to launch a multifront campaign against Israel, which would include Hezbollah, Shia forces in Syria, and Palestinian terrorist groups in Jordan, Sinai, and the West Bank, alongside attacks against Jewish targets worldwide. The intention of coordinating this campaign with Iran was also noted in the document.

Israel, Lieberman cautioned, needed to act before it was too late.

"While the defensive barrier being built in front of Gaza—with all of its different elements—is an important part of Israel's security strategy, it cannot be a strategy on its own," the defense minister wrote. "Fences and fortifications do not prevent war and do not guarantee quiet and security."

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Everything mentioned in the document ended up happening—Hamas's military buildup, its armament of vast stockpiles of rockets, GPS jammers, drones, remote-controlled underwater vehicles, and an extensive naval array. Hamas was using the periods of quiet between Israeli military operations to enhance its capabilities.

In the years that followed, the IDF's misjudgments became painfully clear. One of the strongest countries in the Middle East, with one of the world's most sophisticated intelligence services, Israel had ignored the black-and-white intelligence that warned of the coming war.

This feeling of a missed opportunity was shared by most of the officers who served in the Southern Command. When Major General Eliezer Toledano, once head of the Southern Command, stepped down just a few months before October 7, for example, he left the base with a deep sense of frustration.

Yes, Toledano said to himself, he had maintained the quiet and no soldier or civilian had been abducted under his watch, but he had not been able to deliver a blow that would have crippled Hamas's military capabilities. He was so upset that he decided to cancel the farewell party that had been planned for him.

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No one had anticipated a surprise attack of such a scale by Hamas. Despite repeated threats, Israeli intelligence had believed that Hamas was deterred, more interested in calm than in conflict, and, unlike the threat posed by Hezbollah, which was always taken with the utmost seriousness, it could always be dealt with if there was no alternative. This flawed perception allowed Hamas to meticulously prepare for its assault while Israel slept.

The *Jericho Walls* booklet, the emails by the Unit 8200 analyst, and the Lieberman paper all spelled out the danger, yet the response by the IDF and the government was inadequate. The Southern Command under Toledano, for example, had prepared IDF forces for small-scale ground offensives in the Gaza Strip, but nothing like the large-scale invasion that would be needed after October 7.

In December 2022, just about ten months before the war, then IDF chief of staff Aviv Kohavi addressed an internal Aman conference and confidently declared that the past two years had been the quietest and most stable in Gaza. He attributed the success to Israel's strategy of deterrence. He praised the trilogy of operations that he commanded over—Black Belt (2019), Guardian of the Walls (2021), and Breaking Dawn (2022)—for creating a new reality.

"Not only does Hamas not respond to our attacks, but it does also not consider doing so," he declared confidently.

Amit Sa'ar, head of Aman's Research Division, echoed the same sentiment at the conference: "We are entering 2023 with Gaza stable and our deterrence high. The equation that we have created is one where there will be a price for civilian life in Gaza.… They now have what to gain from the quiet," Sa'ar said.

The perception was that Hamas had too much to lose by initiating conflict. Yet, nine days after this meeting, Sinwar publicly described

Hamas's plan to raid Israel in a future war.

"We will come to you, God willing, in a roaring flood. We will come to you with endless rockets, we will come to you in a limitless flood of soldiers, we will come to you with millions of our people, like the repeating tide," he said at a rally for his Hamas followers in Gaza. Flood was not a random word. The October 7 invasion was called by Hamas the "Al-Aqsa Flood," a reference to the mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

However, Sinwar's words fell on deaf Israeli ears.

The one consistent exception—to some extent—was in Shin Bet, whose director, Bar, followed in the footsteps of his predecessor and constantly pushed for a more aggressive Hamas policy. Sinwar, Bar repeatedly told Netanyahu, was driven by opportunity and not fear. In 2022, for example, Shin Bet recorded sixty daily alerts of Hamas-directed attacks in the West Bank; in 2023, the number increased to two hundred.

Before assuming his role as head of Shin Bet in October 2021, Bar had written a strategic plan for the agency. In it he explained that Israel could not afford to have a powerful adversary aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood so close to its border. To stop Hamas, Israel needed to launch a preemptive strike and take out the leadership—Sinwar, Deif, and others—as soon as possible.

In February 2023, a shooting attack took place outside a hummus restaurant at the entrance of the West Bank settlement of Eli. Two Israelis were killed. Four months later, another attack took place at the same restaurant, and this time four people were killed. Hamas in Gaza took responsibility for orchestrating the attack.

Bar saw Hamas's claim of responsibility as a turning point. It meant that Hamas did not fear an Israeli retaliation in Gaza. It was as if Sinwar was testing Israel.

In September, three weeks before the war, Bar convened a meeting with his top staff. He was pushing the government to launch a preemptive attack against Hamas and wanted to prepare his organization for the war in Gaza that would erupt if the government authorized the elimination of Sinwar or Deif.

On October 1, Bar met with Netanyahu and presented the plan, but no decisions were made. Instead, they scheduled a follow-up meeting for October 8. That meeting never happened.

It is hard to know what Sinwar was thinking when he launched the attack on October 7. Some Israeli officials believe that he actually feared a preemptive strike and decided to initiate the war before Israel could. Others think that he simply wanted to surprise Israel, block Saudi normalization, and put the Palestinian issue back on the world's agenda. Either way, it is impossible to ignore the vast gaps in Israel's intelligence agencies and their failure to understand the information they had sitting right before them.

Given the knowledge that Hamas had an attack plan and had spent years practicing for it, Halevi, the IDF chief of staff, should have been less hesitant about doing something public. He should have demanded a preemptive strike either long before October 7 or, at the very least, when he received the warnings on October 6.

The conditions at the start of the war were not in Israel's favor. The IDF was taken completely by surprise and had insufficient numbers to counter the enemy at almost every point. There was no coherent war plan that matched the reality on the ground, and Finkelman, the Southern Command chief, had to draw up plans for an offensive on the fly, when Israel was already at war.

With hundreds of miles of tunnels under Gaza, booby traps everywhere, and terrorists armed with enough weapons to shame a Western army, the task was staggering. Last, but not least, the IDF Southern Command had to prepare and launch a ground offensive, all while knowing that some 250 hostages were in Gaza and their lives were on the line.

It was a race against time, with the fate of a nation hanging in the balance.

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2

Overcoming the Fear of Gaza

The end of September 2023 was cool, though a bit of sunlight pierced the gray clouds above Jerusalem. The parking lot at the entrance to the prime minister's office, a dreary building in the middle of the capital, teemed with security guards clad in North Face fleeces standing alongside armored vehicles with black-tinted windows. Inside, the heads of Israel's security organizations convened for a critical discussion, presided over by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Gallant. On the agenda: assess the myriad of threats facing Israel, both along its borders and beyond them.

The routine meeting, something like an annual ritual that precedes every Jewish holiday, had been penciled into the senior officials' diaries weeks earlier. This one came before the holidays of Sukkot and Simchat Torah. Decisions needed to be made, mostly regarding the reinforcement of military forces along Israel's various fronts—the borders with Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank—where warnings of terrorist threats persisted.

The defense establishment's top brass were all there: IDF chief of staff Halevi, Aman chief Haliva, Mossad chief David Barnea, and Ronen Bar, director of Shin Bet.

Amid the general pre-holiday mood, the meeting, which included classified intelligence briefings, concluded on an optimistic note. None of the assembled security and intelligence chiefs had a clue about the sinister plot that was being finalized as they met.

Three days after the meeting in Jerusalem, Brigadier General Yitzhak Cohen, commander of the IDF's 162nd Armored Division, who had just taken up command of the IDF unit a week earlier, decided to invite his division's veteran chief of staff, retired brigadier general Moshe Mayo, for an impromptu meeting at his home.

Cohen's military journey began in 1995 as an infantryman in the Givati Brigade, where he specialized in counterterrorism operations in the Gaza Strip. Those were the first days of Palestinian and Hamas terrorism, and Israel was adapting, improvising, and figuring out along the way how to fight it. Cohen later assumed command of Givati's explosives company during the turbulent years preceding Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, honing his expertise in combating organized Hamas attacks.

In the IDF, Cohen was looked at as something of an expert in battling Palestinian terrorism. He literally earned his stripes in the narrow alleys of Gaza's densely populated neighborhoods—Khan Younis, Rafah, and Gaza City. An intimate familiarity with the terrain, the local culture, and close-quarters combat gave him rare insight into what Hamas had become. He helped develop new counterterrorism tactics for urban warfare, some of which were disseminated across the IDF's various units.

As dusk settled, Mayo arrived at Cohen's home in Kibbutz Negba, which lies in the Negev Desert just a twenty-minute drive from the Gaza border. Established in 1939 by Jewish immigrants from Poland and Romania, Kibbutz Negba had survived some of the fiercest attacks during the 1948 War of Independence.

The UN vote on the Partition Plan in 1947—to divide the land between Jews and Arabs—left Kibbutz Negba on the Israeli side of the border. When the War of Independence broke out in 1948, though, the Egyptian army raided the kibbutz from several directions, and for three months carried out an unprecedented assault with warplanes, tanks, and artillery cannons. Most of its infrastructure was destroyed, but despite the relentless attacks, along with ammunition and food shortages, the kibbutz refused to surrender.

The kibbutz members, young immigrants, fought from bunkers, trenches, and fortified positions they had built underground, and when they were finally joined by the nascent IDF, they went on to defeat the Egyptian army, turning the kibbutz into a symbol of Israeli tenacity and

determination. It was the classic Jewish story of how the few overcame the many.

Mayo, fifty-six, smoked one last cigarette and then joined Cohen in the family sukkah, nestled between a row of green bushes and dusty trails. Mayo recounted the division's rigorous training regimen over the last few years, its level of readiness for possible war, and then presented the rookie division commander with some ideas for how to best utilize the coming year of 2024 for training.

As they sat sipping black coffee, the two officers tried to analyze the variety of threat scenarios that Israel faced and what would happen if, for example, war broke out in the north or in the south. Would the General Staff, they wondered, activate the division—one of the IDF's most powerful combat formations—and use it in ground battles?

At one point, the two men discussed the situation in the Gaza Strip, and both shared a feeling that something was wrong. Things were obviously tense there, and violent border protests in the weeks preceding Sukkot had underscored the volatility, but there was nothing specific they could put their finger on. Neither had concrete intelligence on which to draw, and they lamented that the conversation in Israel was focused more on Qatari money being sent to Gaza and Palestinians being allowed into Israel for work than about a new war. Nevertheless, a palpable unease lingered between them.

"It feels like we are again on the eve of Operation Protective Edge," Cohen told Mayo, referring to the last large-scale ground war Israel waged against Hamas almost a decade earlier in the summer of 2014. Mayo referenced intelligence that showed how Hamas, along with having its hand in the Gaza border riots, was also trying to increase its terrorist attacks in the West Bank. The climate felt similar to 2014, when a stalemate masked by positive diplomatic overtures failed to foretell a security crisis. Might Hamas be planning something behind the scenes?

To ease their concerns, the two decided to conduct a series of checks to ensure that the division was prepared for any scenario. They met at division headquarters in the Jordan Valley and reached out to intelligence agencies for updates on any signs of unusual activity. The Southern Command's intelligence office reassured them that everything was fine, asserting that the situation was calm and that they had received no specific warnings of any escalation expected in the Gaza Strip.

Cohen and Mayo were not convinced, and despite the ongoing Sukkot holiday, they issued orders and carried out inspections of the division's various units. They wanted to be sure that the forces could rapidly transition from routine to war.

Cohen didn't waste time waiting for directives from the IDF General Staff. He elevated the division's level of alert and started distributing orders to its different units—the brigades that would be called on to fight if war was forced upon Israel.

They didn't know that four days later, on October 7, at 6:29 A.M., the forces would have to do exactly that when Hamas began their unprecedented attack with a rocket barrage across the country.

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As Cohen manned the phones, thousands of armed terrorists were flooding into Israel from the Gaza Strip through dozens of breaches in the border barrier. Disturbing images and videos flooded social media, depicting the massacre of civilians and widespread destruction in the nearby kibbutzim. The videos showed some of the worst atrocities imaginable—murder, rape, looting, and the abduction of children and Holocaust survivors.

The IDF Operations Directorate contacted Cohen and ordered him to report down south. His division was being activated to retake the kibbutzim and IDF border posts that had been overrun by Hamas.

Cohen scrambled everyone—units like the Givati Brigade, the Nahal Brigade, the 401st Armored Brigade, and more. He didn't have the intelligence to understand how many terrorists were in Israel or which towns had been invaded, but he clearly needed numbers.

One of the first challenges for the IDF was trying to establish a comprehensive picture of what was happening on the ground and to mobilize an appropriate response. The problem was that no one had a clear operational picture and was capable of giving orders; every commander was doing what they thought was right at an unbearable price. Colonel Yonatan Steinberg, commander of the Nahal Brigade, one of the IDF's elite infantry units, for example, left his home in the Negev and raced to the border to join the forces who were struggling to stop the invasion from southern Gaza, near Egypt. Steinberg did so without knowing that they would face a

substantial force. He fell that day in a gun battle with Hamas terrorists just outside the Gaza Strip.

As Israeli forces were trying to stop the flood of terrorists from Gaza, on the opposite side of the country in the north, Lieutenant Colonel Ziv Boanish was wrapping up a week of training with his elite unit. A few months earlier, he had assumed command of the Givati Brigade's reconnaissance and commando unit—known as Sayeret Givati—and had spent the weeks before the holiday overseeing several complicated operations against Palestinian terrorist cells in the West Bank. In early October, just before the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, his unit received a break to train and happened to be up along the border with Lebanon, drilling a staged Hezbollah infiltration into Israel, what was at the time perceived to be the greatest and most immediate threat to the country. Gaza was far from his mind.

The scenario for the drill was simple but deadly: it imagined that a battalion from the terror group's elite Radwan Unit had infiltrated the small Israeli town of Margaliot along the border with Lebanon. Boanish's unit was tasked with retaking it.

The exercise was a failure. Boanish faced unexpected challenges. Despite his background in Duvdevan Unit, renowned for its counterterrorism operations, he had underestimated the "enemy" and thought that he could stop it by sending in a few different forces of his own into separate locations.

But the Israeli soldiers representing the "Hezbollah" force he drilled against were smarter. Led by a Givati Brigade commander, they strategically positioned ambushes at the entrance to the town and snipers on the rooftops, thwarting Boanish's attempts to repel the incursion, leaving his troops effectively neutralized.

Boanish, the father of three young boys, was devastated. He knew that these results were unacceptable. He felt that his whole life, to some extent, was about this job. He had been born in Geneva to a French father who had moved to Israel decades earlier. Even though Boanish had started his military service in Duvdevan, his commander at the time decided to bring him along when he moved to command the Givati Brigade. That is how he joined the men in purple, the color of the Givati beret.

In 2015, when he was twenty-five and a company commander, Boanish was selected as one of a hundred soldiers to receive a citation from the chief of staff for exemplary service. It was a moment of pride for his city of Rehovot, and Boanish was featured in the local newspaper. “I don’t think I deserve the citation,” he told the paper. “My unit does.”

He strongly believed in working as a team, and after the failed drill, he gathered his officers under the cover of a tree overlooking southern Lebanon and acknowledged the inadequacy of their response. “If something like this really happens, we will not be able to win this way,” he said. “We have to come with more forces, otherwise we will get hit.”

Little did he know how soon that true test would come.

A few days later was October 7, and minutes into the attack, Boanish received a call from the commander of the Givati Brigade: “There seems to have been an infiltration of terrorists into several communities along the Gaza border. This is not a usual attack.”

While vague, the report was enough for Boanish. He scrambled the entire battalion back to base in the Negev and didn’t even wait for authorization to call up the reserves. Everyone was ordered to come immediately. An inquiry weeks later would show that his decision was of existential importance—Boanish’s quick action saved lives and prevented additional terrorist abductions.

By 8:00 A.M., the first company of the Givati Reconnaissance Battalion was dispatched to Sderot, a town of about 30,000 residents in the Negev. Dozens of terrorists, armed with anti-tank missiles, AK-47s, grenades, and explosives, had infiltrated the city in pickup trucks and were in the midst of a ferocious assault on the local police station.

The Givati soldiers engaged in close combat, and when the police’s elite counterterrorism unit Yamam arrived to deal with the battle, Boanish received permission to move his forces to the kibbutzim. Sderot seemed under control but his phone didn’t stop vibrating. Distress calls and messages poured in from former comrades stationed in the besieged kibbutzim along the border. People, they told Boanish, were being shot in their beds. Others were locked in their safe rooms as Hamas terrorists were trying to break down the doors.

The IDF still did not have a full picture of what was happening on the ground. After receiving clearance from the top brass, the Givati Brigade

commander authorized Boanish to proceed to Kibbutz Nahal Oz. “You go conquer Nahal Oz,” he said. “I will go conquer Kfar Aza.”

Boanish was puzzled by the use of the word “conquer” when talking about a town in Israel. “Sir, I don’t understand. What did you say?”

The brigade commander answered sharply. “There are hundreds of terrorists in Nahal Oz. Go there. They are slaughtering the residents.”

It was then that the scope and urgency of what was happening dawned on Boanish. He now had to do what his unit had failed at just a week before—reconquer an Israeli town overrun by terrorists.

He ordered his driver to floor it to Nahal Oz, and with every minute that passed he was weighed down by the burden of responsibility. Along the route, scenes of the devastation unfolded, and every hundred yards or so he and his unit came under fire from Hamas ambushes. In his head he kept replaying the exercise at Margaliot.

“There is no way we fail this time,” he muttered under his breath, deciding right there that he needed to flood the kibbutz with as many soldiers as possible. Drawing on his training and thankful that his unit had stopped by the base on the way to replenish their ammo, Boanish pressed forward, determined to get to the kibbutz and reclaim it from the clutches of terror.

As he approached the intersection outside Nahal Oz, Boanish looked to his right and saw smoke coming from the nearby IDF outpost, which had been overrun. On his left was the kibbutz where smoke was also rising and gunfire could be heard.

He ordered his driver to head toward the kibbutz. “It was clear to me, and it was how I was educated—first we rescue civilians and then we rescue soldiers,” he said.

At the entrance to the kibbutz, he encountered a Yamam commando who was self-administering a tourniquet. A few yards beyond, he saw an officer from the elite Maglan unit lying dead in the grass.

After conferring with his troops, at 11 A.M., Boanish initiated a coordinated assault on the kibbutz. The soldiers split into teams and walked on the paths that used to be full of children and were now lined with bodies, going house to house in search of the armed Hamas men. Gunfights erupted at almost every corner and, after a grueling fifteen-hour battle, Boanish and his men ultimately wrested control from the terrorists. The success of their

mission was promptly relayed across military channels, and for the next two days Boanish's unit scoured the nearby fields for any remaining terrorists before transferring control to a battalion of reservists.

For the soldiers, navigating the pathways of the battlefield that was supposed to be a tranquil Israeli kibbutz posed unprecedented challenges. Distinguishing between Israeli civilians and the enemy proved daunting, with gunfire echoing through the streets.

"I went into homes of kibbutz residents and felt like I was in a war zone," he recalled. "I saw how bodies had been dragged on the floor inside pools of blood. Doors were riddled with bullets."

In one incident, Boanish approached a seemingly deserted home, only to hear strange sounds coming from the safe room, the room that every Israeli home has, which is made of fortified concrete to protect against missile attacks. On October 7, many residents huddled in these rooms, fighting back Hamas attackers who tried and sometimes succeeded in breaking down the door. Some of the kibbutz residents had private guns; others fought with whatever they found in the house that could serve as a weapon.

Boanish couldn't tell who was in the room. "Open up," he called out. "It is Givati." But the door wouldn't open. Fearing that terrorists were inside, Boanish issued a stern ultimatum: "If you don't open the door, I will open fire."

When the door still didn't open, Boanish fired off a round into the house. "I just shot a bullet," he said. "If you are Israelis in there, open the door. This is the Givati Reconnaissance Battalion. If you don't, I will kill who is inside."

Suddenly, Boanish heard the sound of a woman whispering to her husband. "I think it really is the IDF," she said. Boanish told his men to lower their weapons and he again knocked on the door. When it opened, the husband stood at the front with a pistol aimed at Boanish.

"Where were you?" the man yelled, crying. "What took you so long!"

It was a scream Boanish heard countless times during that day. "It is what happens when people feel abandoned," he later explained. "It was not simple."

After the family—a husband and wife and their young daughter—left the safe room, Boanish told the father that most of the houses his soldiers

had searched were empty.

“That is because so many were taken hostage,” the father told him.

It was then that the true extent of the tragedy at Kibbutz Nahal Oz came into sharp focus—at Nahal Oz, terrorists had murdered thirty-five residents and taken around a dozen more hostage.

There was no time to absorb the horror. Suddenly, a soldier’s voice crackled over the unit’s communication network: “Commander, we have a kidnapping situation here. I am engaging with terrorists.” Boanish sprinted off toward the kibbutz’s western fence facing Gaza. Later, the army would see the series of holes Hamas had blown in the fence, using the kibbutz’s towering eucalyptus trees for cover.

As he reached the fence, a familiar voice came on the radio. It was one of his reservists who had set up a position a couple of kilometers from the kibbutz. “If you need mortar fire, just give word,” the reservist told Boanish.

Impressed by the reservists’ quick arrival, Boanish told the soldier to get ready. Within minutes they spotted a group of terrorists fleeing back to Gaza on motorbikes. Boanish gave the order, and the reservists laid down precise mortar fire. At the same time, an undercover Border Police unit launched an assault on another group of Hamas fighters, eliminating six of them while a Givati officer took out six more, averting the abduction of Israeli bodies into Gaza.

While Boanish and his team found some success throughout the day, it was still one of unimaginable anguish. Every resident Boanish encountered demanded answers: “Where were you? Where was the army? What took you so long?”

Boanish didn’t have much to say. “I am here now. Now, I will do everything I can.”

Over the course of Saturday alone, Boanish and his men eliminated 19 terrorists and rescued 358 Israeli civilians. By Tuesday, their collective efforts had resulted in the elimination of more than 60 terrorists inside Israel.

But this was just the beginning. Boanish knew what was coming next—there was no way Israel was not going into Gaza, and there was no way his reconnaissance battalion was not going to be at the tip of the Israeli spear.

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The entire country was reeling in shock and disbelief. The gruesome aftermath of the terrorists' rampage in Israel was unprecedented, and it took days for the full extent of the horror to become clear: 251 people had been abducted by Hamas, over 1,200 innocent lives were brutally taken, and more than 10,000 people were injured.

The IDF swiftly moved to regain control, focusing initially on recapturing the kibbutzim and military outposts in the Western Negev and refortifying the border to prevent additional assaults. The IDF then began preparing for the inevitable counteroffensive. Looming over the military preparations was a palpable sense of apprehension among the political and security leadership regarding the potential ramifications of a ground operation.

Operation Protective Edge in 2014 was the last time IDF troops had entered Gaza, and the military quickly found itself embroiled in a protracted conflict, one of the longest since the nation's inception in 1948. Hamas and other terrorist factions in the Gaza Strip had meticulously prepared for an Israeli ground incursion, fortifying themselves with an extensive network of tunnels, anti-tank missile units, snipers, and a substantial arsenal of mortar shells.

After 51 days of fighting in 2014, the toll was grim: 68 soldiers and 5 civilians had been killed, and more than 1,400 soldiers and 800 civilians were injured. Despite the IDF's efforts, Hamas's elaborate tunnel network posed a significant challenge, and a threat to both Israeli troops and civilians. Back then, Aman discovered that Hamas had thousands of tunnel hatches scattered throughout Gaza, and Hamas terrorists continued to pop out of tunnels inside Israeli territory almost until the end of the operation.

At that time, the fear of descending into a Palestinian death trap was on the minds of all of the military brass and the political leadership, who were discouraged by Netanyahu from endorsing a full-scale ground offensive in the densely populated Gaza Strip. At one point during the 2014 operation, someone in the cabinet leaked to the media a PowerPoint presentation that had been prepared by the IDF chief of staff, Benny Gantz (who, days after October 7, agreed to join Netanyahu's coalition as part of an emergency government). In 2014 the IDF predicted that five hundred soldiers would be

killed in an incursion, and the leaked presentation was seen as an attempt to scare the public against the need for a large-scale ground operation.

Hamas was watching and learning. Sensing the IDF's fear—the 2014 operation only extended a few kilometers into Gaza—Hamas understood that it had an opportunity to protect itself even further from an Israeli offensive. It embarked on a massive military spending spree, acquiring advanced anti-tank missiles and high-quality explosives while continuing to expand its tunnel network, digging even deeper under Gaza, with some tunnels reaching forty to sixty meters deep. This way, Hamas terrorists would be protected from Israeli airstrikes and would be able to move freely without being detected.

What Israel did not know at the time was that its actions in 2014 actually planted the seed for October 7. The fear of sending troops into Gaza had been expressed by senior military and government officials, who delegitimized IDF ground forces and claimed that Israeli infantry and armor would not be capable of achieving their objectives. This made Hamas think that even after such a brutal attack the IDF would again restrain itself out of a fear of losing soldiers. This emboldened Hamas.

It was a mistake of unbelievable proportions that Israel now needed to correct.

All of this was known to the IDF in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attacks. And while there was fear of what the IDF ground forces would encounter in Gaza, the prevailing sentiment of shock and outrage in Israel underscored an unavoidable reality: Israel had to launch a large-scale ground offensive.

The rage, fueled by the humiliation and the audacity of the Hamas attack, seared through the nation. IDF intelligence quickly assessed that even Hamas had been stunned by its success. The IDF's mission, along with eliminating Hamas, was to retrieve the hostages, and each would require decisive action. Some officers expressed a deep-seated desire for retribution, but most understood that this was about reshaping Israeli security for years to come.

"There is no war more justified than this one," many said.

Still, the looming specter of Hamas's entrenched defenses built up over the previous two decades, along with the certainty of casualties, weighed heavily on the minds of Israeli commanders. The Gaza Strip's reputation as

a fortress of tunnels only heightened the sense of trepidation within the IDF ranks. The tunnels beneath it posed the greatest challenge, and some were believed to now run as deep as seventy meters underground. Gaza, IDF officers said, was the "land of tunnels and IEDs [improvised explosive devices]."

IDF casualties had long haunted Israel, a country where often it seemed like the loss of a soldier hurts more than when a civilian is killed in a terrorist attack. Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah picked up on this sentiment, likening the Jewish state to a fragile spider's web after Israel withdrew in 2000 from the security zone it had held in Lebanon for eighteen years. Israel, he said at the time, appeared strong on the outside but was actually weak within, and could easily fall apart under the right combination of attacks.

Nasrallah's words had clearly resonated with Hamas, fueling the Gaza-based terrorist group's determination to orchestrate a deliberate assault on Israeli settlements and civilians.

But even without Nasrallah's public criticism, there were people in Israel who were skeptical of the IDF's capabilities, starting with the prime minister himself. Despite his aggressive right-wing image, Benjamin Netanyahu has long been hesitant to employ military force. When he did so before October 7, it was almost always with standoff capabilities, like the attacks Israel has carried out in Syria over the years against Iran's entrenchment there, missions that almost never require boots on the ground and are pinpointed, precise, and quick.

Longtime observers have credited this approach to Netanyahu's military service in the IDF's elite General Staff Reconnaissance Unit (known as Sayeret Matkal), which specializes in covert operations deep behind enemy lines. It is almost an army within an army, whose maneuvers are not connected to the larger and heavier infantry and armored corps.

The decision to send troops into Gaza had to be forced upon Netanyahu. For the first few weeks of the 2014 operation, he refused to send ground forces into Hamas territory despite fierce security cabinet pressure from then-minister and later prime minister Naftali Bennett.

In 2014, only after Hamas terrorists began popping out of tunnels to carry out successful raids of IDF outposts and border assembly points did he finally acquiesce, but even then only in a limited way, allowing

incursions only deep enough to stop the cross-border tunnels. The other tunnels inside Gaza? Those would be dealt with as much as possible by the air force.

The delegitimization of the IDF's ground forces didn't stop. Even after the October 7 attacks, Netanyahu was not certain what to do. While most Israelis were calling for an immediate ground incursion, there was a seemingly official lobby of former generals and war heroes who argued on every stage and in the pages of every newspaper that the Israeli military was not capable of a ground offensive.

One of those former generals was Itzhak Brik, who served from 2008 to 2018 as the IDF ombudsman. His job was to receive and manage the complaints of soldiers against their commanders. He also knew what it was like to fight on the battlefield. In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Brik's face was badly burned by an anti-tank missile, but he refused to be evacuated, switched tanks, fought back, and stopped the Egyptian invasion near the Suez Canal. For his courage, he was awarded the Israeli Medal of Honor.

As a sign of Netanyahu's possible state of mind, Brik was one of the people he consulted on at least five different occasions after the October 7 attacks, and what he said was clear. "We are not prepared for the difficult war that will be here in a few months or years," Brik explained. "Our competence has been damaged for years. The IDF is not ready for war, and this is expressed in basic things."

Up until October 7, Brik's comments were mostly viewed as something of a personal vendetta against one of the former IDF chiefs of staff whom he apparently disliked and, as he believed, had made the army too small and too technological. He repeatedly warned that if another war broke out, it would make the Yom Kippur War look like a walk in the park.

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Even before the cabinet convened to approve a ground offensive in Gaza, there was an understanding in the IDF that an aerial war would not work this time. Hamas needed to pay for what it did, and the military conducted a comprehensive assessment of its different units. One of the first decisions the Southern Command had to make was which division would lead the coming ground offensive. Yitzhak Cohen's 162nd Division had fought

valiantly in the first hours of the war and was chosen to spearhead the ground offensive into Gaza.

The 162nd Division was selected due to the quality of its forces, the extensive training it had undergone in the preceding years, the high-level equipment its units employed, and its level of readiness for battle.

Yaron Finkelman, head of the Southern Command, was himself a former commander of the Givati Brigade, which falls under the auspices of the 162nd Division. He understood that the division's actions would determine the future of the war. If Cohen and his men succeeded, the cabinet would have the confidence to continue, and Brik and his ilk would be discredited; if they failed, the war would be over before anyone knew it.

"You hold the fate of this war that has been forced upon us," he told Cohen. "The quality of your actions will dictate the scale and strength of the ground offensive ahead. This battle rests squarely on all our shoulders." With full backing from the IDF chief of staff, Finkelman directed the division to be furnished with everything it would need to successfully carry out its incursion into Gaza.

As the IDF General Staff drew up timetables for the 162nd Division's advance into Gaza City, all of the military's planning bodies—from Aman to the C4I Directorate, the air force, and the navy—were placed at Cohen's disposal. The situation in Israel had reached a critical juncture. The public's sense of security had been shattered, and fears of further terrorist infiltrations hovered in the air. To safeguard the division's field headquarters near the border, two companies of soldiers were stationed nearby, poised to respond to any threat.

Gathering the division's leadership, Cohen issued a clear directive: "Gaza City does not have one way to bring it down. Its collapse will not hinge on a single action but will depend on our smart pursuit of several strategic targets. Creativity will be our greatest asset."

The first and most immediate threat to the IDF troops would be the booby traps, the IEDs, and the anti-tank missiles that Hamas had built up over the last decade and distributed throughout Gaza. It required the attacking forces to be innovative. Colonel Benny Aharon, commander of the 401st Brigade, which operated the IDF's most sophisticated tank, the Merkava Mk 4, held a series of experiments along the Mediterranean coast to see how the tanks navigated beaches, thus allowing them to bypass

regular roads that were certain to be loaded with Hamas IEDs. He wanted to see how the Merkava maneuvered in sand and shallow water.

In Givati, soldiers honed what they called the “Pac-Man method,” coming up with new ways to move through built-up urban areas, undeterred by the looming threat of explosives. Operators of D9s, the armored Caterpillar bulldozers used by the IDF, learned how to collapse buildings and create new pathways clear of IEDs and booby traps.

Despite meticulous preparations, such ground operations remained fraught with challenges. Moshe Mayo, a veteran of multiple campaigns over the years in Gaza, pressed the Southern Command to pave a new four-mile-long road within the Palestinian territory, a daring move that was meant to give the military a sterile surface to move over without fearing explosives.

“You are crazy, but we will get it done,” the Southern Command’s engineer told Mayo. Within twenty-four hours, hundreds of trucks moved asphalt and other materials to an assembly depot near the border.

To weaken the Hamas forces entrenched in tunnels, Finkelman sanctioned localized operations near the border, and the division positioned artillery batteries nearby, synchronizing efforts for maximum impact.

“We aimed to neutralize their anti-tank systems and surveillance positions preemptively and even before a single tank crossed the border,” a senior officer within the 162nd Division recounted. “That is what we did. Each time we provoked Hamas, they tried to use anti-tank missiles, and then we attacked the source of their fire. As the 401st Brigade led the charge, followed by Givati, our adversaries’ confusion grew, our precision improved, and they could not understand when and where we were coming from and whether this was a mini operation or a large-scale offensive.”

A week after these preliminary operations, the decisive moment arrived for the ground maneuver into northern Gaza. Under the cover of darkness, artillery batteries unleashed a barrage on Hamas positions and tunnels, timed with the relocation of Palestinian residents from northern Gaza to the south. As the clock struck 10:00 P.M. on October 27, troops from the 162nd Division stood poised near the border, awaiting Cohen’s order.

“On the morning of October 7—on Shabbat and the holiday of Simchat Torah—the despicable enemy launched a barbaric murderous terror assault against children, women, men, and the elderly,” Cohen said over the

division’s internal communications network. “We did not seek this battle; the enemy did, and the enemy started. The entire world is watching us now, and the people of Israel trust us and stand behind us.”

Cohen continued: “Tonight, the valiant forces of the 162nd Division and the Southern Command embark on a mission to sever the hand that seeks to choke us. With the unyielding might of steel, we shall crush our adversaries like a clenched fist. There is no challenge that we cannot overcome, and no foe is beyond our reach. I will stand with you on the battlefield shoulder to shoulder until our mission is fulfilled to its entirety.”

At military headquarters in Tel Aviv, in the Bor, the country’s top political and military leadership had gathered to monitor the division’s initial crossing of the border.

“We knew that at that exact moment it wasn’t just Israel that was watching us but the entire world, including the leaders of countries. There were those who wanted us to succeed, and others who didn’t,” Mayo would later recall.

One by one, brigade commanders confirmed the historic directive, dispatching IDF battalions across the border. As the 401st Brigade’s 52nd Armored Battalion led the charge, they swiftly met every hostile gesture with a response from land, air, or sea. The advance unfolded dramatically with unprecedented fire from the air and the ground, providing cover so the 401st and the Givati Brigades could penetrate deep into enemy territory. The Nahal Brigade followed suit, venturing into Beit Lahiya, a city in northern Gaza, joined later by the 460th Brigade.

From the war room of the division’s headquarters, Cohen oversaw the operations, monitoring communications and live aircraft feeds. With Gaza City’s “Northern Gate” in sight, amid the threat of explosives and anti-tank fire, the mission’s objectives came sharply into focus: seize Hamas’s headquarters and neutralize “Outpost 17,” a hub of underground tunnels in the heart of Gaza City where Hamas leaders were believed to be hiding.

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The initial phase of the ground maneuver was entrusted to the 52nd Armored Battalion’s “Rage Company” under the command of Major Tal Rabinowitz.

He was young, but Rabinowitz had already proven himself in battle and in Gaza. Nine years earlier, in Operation Protective Edge, Rabinowitz was commanding a tank platoon when he received an urgent communication about IDF paratroopers who had been ambushed by Hamas in a densely populated area surrounded by thick wild brush. Despite the imminent danger from IEDs, mines, and anti-tank missiles, Rabinowitz boldly directed his tank through the narrow streets, providing critical fire support for the pinned-down troops. Rabinowitz's swift action thwarted a Hamas attempt to abduct a paratrooper, earning him a commendation from the Southern Command for his valor.

On October 7, Rabinowitz—now a thirty-four-year-old construction engineer and father of three small children, with another one on the way—was already a few years out of the military. He found himself abruptly summoned from home by a "Zav 8"—the military term for emergency callup orders for reservists. A Zav 8 means that reservists need to immediately stop whatever they are doing and report to base. Despite initial skepticism from some company commanders regarding the choice of a reserve unit for the opening of the ground maneuver, Rabinowitz's distinguished combat record, his bravery, and the caliber of his subordinates helped ease the decision.

Following the decision to assign the mission to Rabinowitz, the company started collecting all available intelligence on Hamas's preparations in the northern Gaza Strip, preparing for the different challenges that its Merkava tanks would face upon crossing the border. The unit had little time, but spent about a week training, with the main threat being scenarios involving anti-tank missile ambushes.

Aman briefers spoke of two circles of Hamas's defenses that the units would encounter. The first was immediately across the border, where the tanks would be vulnerable to massive mine-like explosives that Hamas had buried in areas where it presumed the IDF would enter the Strip. The second was the Hamas terrorists themselves, who would be waiting for the IDF soldiers in tunnels, ready to pop out to attack with guided anti-tank missiles. Rage Company soldiers underwent rigorous field training over several long days and nights, and senior commanders came to observe the drills firsthand.

Two days before the planned incursion, Rabinowitz met with Colonel Aharon, commander of the 401st Brigade, just before midnight, to review the route that his tanks would take when crossing into enemy territory. Aharon—a field officer—had just returned south from a war cabinet meeting convened by the prime minister where he reassured the ministers that his tanks could get the job done and open the Gaza Strip to the IDF.

"We have to do this without stopping and with professionalism," Aharon stressed to Rabinowitz. "If we show hesitancy, then it will show everyone above that the IDF is not prepared for the ground offensive, and then they will stop us."

Rabinowitz got the message—the mission was on his shoulders. But he was not afraid. He called upon his sixteen years of training and was filled with a sense of determination.

"In 2014, the intelligence painted a dark and dangerous picture of what would happen once we crossed into Gaza," he recalled. "But like then, we learned that there is no force in the world that can stop a company of Merkava tanks, especially a brigade of them."

Rabinowitz reassured his commander. "We have the best people and soldiers in the world," he told Aharon. "They have the highest level of motivation and are true professionals. When you plan right and train right, then you have the strength to get the mission done."

As the deadline for the maneuver approached, Rabinowitz rallied his commanders and fighters, reminding them of the challenges ahead and the historic significance of their mission. Amid the cacophony of artillery fire, naval bombardment, and aerial assaults, the company led the IDF into Gaza. "No one can stop us, and we are the strongest there is," he told his troops over the internal communications network. "We are at war, and we will write history now. There is no war more just than this one."

Rabinowitz anticipated initial Hamas resistance to be minimal due to the overwhelming IDF firepower that was accompanying the column of tanks, but he cautioned against complacency, warning his soldiers of ambushes that could come out of nowhere. The incursion itself was anything but smooth. As the tanks rolled into Gaza, they became bogged down in terrain waterlogged by recent rains. Despite such setbacks, Rage Company pressed forward, maintaining its schedule and reaching its target, the outskirts of Gaza City, after a grueling forty-eight hours.

After four days of continued combat focused on clearing out the area, a small contingent of just five tanks withdrew to receive logistical support and encountered a fierce Hamas attack—enemy combatants launched a coordinated assault on the force with anti-tank missiles and grenades. Tragically, two soldiers were killed, including Oriya Mesh, forty-one and the father of six, who had been discharged from service but, like many reservists who were no longer obligated to serve, argued to join the war.

It was a blow to Rabinowitz, but the company's mission had been accomplished—Gaza was now accessible, and infantry soldiers could enter. Boanish was one of the first to follow, leading his forces into Gaza City, mostly in the IDF's Namer armored personnel carriers (APCs), now equipped with metal "cope cages" above the turret hatch designed to detonate anti-tank charges before they come into contact with the vehicle itself. These cages were first spotted on Russian tanks shortly before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Boanish's target was the "Security Quadrangle," a key Hamas stronghold in Gaza City and a location that Aman intelligence claimed boasted thick walls and fortifications above an extensive network of tunnels, providing Hamas with the ability to escape in multiple strategic directions.

The first fifty hours of combat as he approached the vicinity of the complex were relentless, with Hamas terrorists employing an unprecedented array of anti-tank missiles and mortar rounds to impede the advancing Israeli forces. Emerging from deep underground shafts, terrorists ran at the APCs, bulldozers, and tanks, trying to attach explosive charges to the passing armor. One Givati unit got hit sixty times by anti-tank missiles within the span of just ninety minutes.

"The battles were nuts," Boanish said about those first hours. "Everything we imagined and everything they told us about the underground network came true. We encountered dozens of hatches and terrorists jumping out of all of them. Until you see it happen, you don't believe it."

Like Boanish and Rabinowitz, many of the commanders were veterans of Protective Edge and were shocked to see what Gaza had turned into. It was like a different place, a terror fortress that had grown right under Israel's nose.

The IDF General Staff closely monitored the operations from Tel Aviv, while in the background the Biden administration and European governments raised concerns about the civilian casualties and the growing humanitarian crisis. IDF officers met with their American counterparts, laid out maps on the table, and showed them the places where they were operating, detailing the steps that had been taken to disperse the civilian population before the incursion.

These steps included never-seen-before measures to move a civilian population out of harm's way, such as giving notice weeks ahead of the initial ground incursion in October, dropping more than seven million flyers over the area of northern Gaza while detailing exactly where the IDF planned to operate. The IDF then made more than seventy thousand direct phones calls and sent more than thirteen million text messages and fifteen million prerecorded voicemails to notify civilians that they should leave the combat areas, specifying where to evacuate to and how to get there.

It is true that by taking such measures the IDF gave up the element of surprise and gave Hamas terrorists the opportunity to flee, but they helped move around 85 percent of the residents of northern Gaza elsewhere before the ground offensive.

IDF officers explained the extensive destruction in Gaza as the result of two elements: first, Hamas had embedded itself within the civilian infrastructure; second, once the IDF had evacuated almost the entire northern part of Gaza, the military was able to more freely engage potential targets and set off booby traps and IEDs to minimize the danger to its own soldiers. This meant that when IDF soldiers came under fire, they responded aggressively, especially when combatting anti-tank squads.

As the ground maneuver progressed, engineering teams were activated to locate, map out, and destroy tunnels, after which the buildings above capsized.

"People think that it is enough to just destroy a tunnel shaft, but they have no idea what they are talking about," one Israeli official explained. "We need to map out the tunnel, determine its route, and make sure that there is nothing on top like a hospital or school that could capsize if we just blow up the tunnel. This takes time."

What the world wasn't paying attention to, though, was that within Israel, IDF commanders were being criticized by Israeli parents who felt

that soldiers' lives were at risk by going into homes instead of just destroying the buildings from the air.

The debate heated up in March 2024 when the IDF went back to al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City where it had operated in the first few weeks of the ground offensive. If initially there were only a handful of Hamas operatives near the hospital, now there were more than one thousand who had established a Hamas base there. The IDF captured around eight hundred and killed another two hundred, but not before evacuating many of the sick and demanding—multiple times—that the Hamas terrorists surrender, which they refused to do.

Some Israeli officials wanted to destroy the entire complex but the idea was rejected. While it might have made sense militarily to prevent Hamas from returning to the hospital and using it again as a main operations center, Israel did not want to directly bomb a hospital.

Not far from where Boanish was operating in the north, the 188th Armored Brigade was fighting in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood, east of Gaza City, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the Middle East until the IDF counterattack. It was rampant with criminal gangs, drug dealers, murderers, and terrorists that Hamas commanders realized they could not control. Instead, they recruited them into the terrorist organization's ranks in exchange for industrial peace. It was a simple arrangement—money and weapons in exchange for loyalty to the Hamas regime.

On October 7, hundreds of the most dangerous terrorists came from Shuja'iyya, penetrated the border fence, attacked the Nahal Oz outpost, Kibbutz Nahal Oz, and Kibbutz Kfar Aza, and committed some of the worst atrocities. Some of the infiltrators came by foot and others by motorcycle. The IDF operation in Shuja'iyya was meant to clear out the terrorist cells and criminal gangs and prevent the homes in the neighborhood from being used as cover to attack and threaten the Israeli border communities in the future.

During a visit to Gaza, one of us met C, a 188th Brigade sniper, who was arranging sandbags by the window on the third floor of a building that the IDF had taken cover in. He was flanked by two other soldiers, so someone was always watching the street below. "Do you see that whole long street?" he asked when we met him in Gaza. "There is no sidewalk

because they placed explosive devices under it all. Hamas didn't care about the children or about anyone."

While international organizations claimed that almost 70 percent of the homes and buildings in Gaza had either been destroyed or damaged by Israel, C's explanation was something that was not at all obvious to the untrained observer. Other studies by the IDF dismissed the 70 percent claim and showed—using the United Nations' own satellite agency—that the number was actually half of that—35 percent—which was less than the percentage of homes destroyed or damaged during the US-led operation against ISIS in Mosul (65 percent) or in Raqqa (40 percent).

"We were in all the buildings you see here," he pointed out the window. "At first, we reached the buildings based on Shin Bet intelligence, but then, because we were shot at from other buildings, we started skipping from one to another."

"It takes time to clear a building," he said, "and each building we went into had weapons and ammunition of all kinds—everything you can imagine. I have never seen such quantities. Sometimes they try to hide the weapons in a secret compartment in the apartment, and sometimes they were just lying out in the open in a children's room, or inside a closet in the living room. We would find soccer balls and next to them, guns. Why is it important to understand this? Because the terrorists can walk down the street in civilian clothes and then just go into a building and take a weapon."

His battalion commander elaborated: "There is not a house here that does not have a weapon; there is not a house here that does not have a tunnel shaft; there is not a school that does not have terrorist infrastructure, and we see them coming out of those buildings, so for us, everything here is full of the enemy. We have learned lessons from past operations. If we enter a space where there is resistance, we go back, return fire, and then enter again, properly."

Even when the soldiers located tunnel shafts, the commander explained, they were not always in a hurry to destroy them. "We wanted to study and investigate them first," he said. "We managed to locate maps in the field and discovered that most of Hamas's infrastructure was based in tunnels under schools, mosques, and inside hospitals. Ammunition is

sometimes hidden in lunch boxes, and weapons are hidden under children's beds."

"You realize that you are facing a vile enemy, who will do anything to hurt you, even if it means sacrificing its own people. This is Hamas."

★ ★ ★

A similar misconception was spread about the death toll in Gaza. A year into the war, for example, the entire world was talking about how more than forty thousand Palestinians had been killed by Israel in Gaza. It was a number heard everywhere—on CNN, from President Joe Biden and the head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The fact that the number came from Hamas made no difference to media outlets or world leaders, even though none of them would ever have thought of quoting al-Qaeda or ISIS about their own death tolls during past American or British operations. In fact, many news publications merely referred to the Gaza Health Ministry—which is run by Hamas—as if it were an independent agency and not a ministry run by a terrorist group.

But the job of the ministry was not to help Gazans; rather, its intention was to supply numbers that suit the terrorist regime in the battle for the world's hearts and minds. Within minutes of any Israeli attack, the ministry, knowing that it would immediately be cited by media, was always ready with numbers of the injured and the dead, fabricating them instead of getting the facts by investigating the scene.

The credibility of Hamas's figures also consistently crumbled under academic scrutiny. At one point, for example, the ministry claimed that 70 percent of the dead were children and women, even though around half of the killed at that point were combatants, Hamas fighters.

The obvious question to ask should have been: where were the noncombatant males? Were none killed in the fighting, or was Hamas simply saying that there are no men in Gaza who are not fighters? Of course, that's not possible. What Hamas really wanted to do, by claiming that those killed and injured were mostly innocent women and children, was to gain sympathy around the world and draw condemnations of Israel.

There's no denying that the death of any innocent person, regardless of gender or age, is tragic, but accuracy matters. War is cruel, and

unfortunately civilians end up in the crossfire. But unlike Israel's enemies, the IDF has a code of conduct that works to ensure the fewest civilian casualties possible.

The fact is that even if you take the Hamas numbers at face value, Israel fought the Hamas threat with far more care than is the norm. When looking at the Hamas numbers and the IDF numbers, the combatant-to-civilian casualty ratio in Gaza was less than 1:2. In other words, for every combatant killed, fewer than two civilians were killed. While every loss of civilian life is tragic, Israel actually achieved a new standard in urban fighting with this ratio. As a point of reference, according to the United Nations Security Council, which held a meeting on the topic on May 25, 2022, civilians usually make up around 60 to 90 percent of the casualties of urban wars.

The problem is that, throughout the war, these facts have been met with deafening silence from world leaders and international forums like the International Court of Justice. They have condemned Israel, accused it of genocide, and argued for a ceasefire even while knowing that doing so would ensure Hamas's survival. They have also been asking Israel to do something that they would never do themselves.

★ ★ ★

The ground operations conducted by the 162nd Division—which was joined a few weeks into the war by the 98th Division—marked a pivotal shift in Israeli military strategy and illustrated how the assumed domestic concern of the cost of an infantry and armored offensive had been exaggerated. For nearly two decades, Hamas had meticulously fortified its defenses against potential Israeli ground incursions, establishing layers of fortifications both above ground and below. Tunnel networks ran under mosques, schools, and hospitals as well as office buildings and private homes, turning them all into military sites. In this civilian setting, Hamas maintained military bases, headquarters, bunkers, arms caches, and even housing for tens of thousands of armed men.

Post-incursion investigations and intelligence gathered during the ground operation—from Hamas documents and hard drives found in Gaza—provided a comprehensive understanding of Hamas's secret bases. Digital

maps marked with red dots enabled Cohen, commander of the 162nd Division, and his team of military planners to execute precise attacks, complementing the maneuvers of the 401st and Givati Brigades, which had penetrated deep into Palestinian territory.

Part of the success in the first phase of the maneuver was the connection between the various IDF units from the air, the sea, and the ground.

“One could argue for hours in the workshops and seminars with the air force about the availability [of aircraft] to attack enemy targets with fighter jets as well as the rate of attacks,” explained a senior reserve officer from the 162nd Division, “but in the moment of truth, the pilots asked a simple question: What do you need? And then they did everything we asked of them with precision. Hundreds of attacks in a short time. No one remembered such a rapid response in any war. And no less important, it was in the timing that the brigade commanders requested. The forces on the ground felt unstoppable. Hamas also understood this and therefore often retreated.”

However, not all aspects of the maneuver proceeded flawlessly. The winter rains created challenges that the IDF would have preferred to avoid. When wet, the Gaza sand bogged down tank treads, hindering the advance of the Israeli forces. Gaza is an area that regularly floods due to the lack of drainage, and troops had to adapt, often being forced to abandon the safety of armored vehicles and navigate toward targets on foot. Despite such obstacles, construction units quickly established logistical supply lines deep into Palestinian territory, paving roads and ensuring that essential provisions reached the advancing forces. The Southern Command’s chief engineer paved miles of roads, taking pride that throughout the war, only a few vehicles had been hit by underground mines.

During the operation, concerns persisted over casualties, international repercussions, and the looming specter of a humanitarian crisis. Nevertheless, the synchronization of intelligence and operations, coupled with meticulous planning and scheduling, enabled the IDF to establish humanitarian supply lines that were frequently criticized by aid groups for taking too long to open and, when they finally were, being inadequate to meet the growing health challenges in Gaza.

During the various stages of the maneuver, the officers were beset by several concerns. Above all, the growing number of dead soldiers had surpassed eight hundred by November 2024, and the number of wounded was far greater, and international legitimacy was slowly chipping away due to the scenes of devastation in Gaza and claims of an imminent humanitarian disaster. There were also hostages in Gaza, requiring a meticulous check of every target not only to minimize civilian casualties but also to ensure that no Israeli hostages were nearby.

It was an operation that changed the way the IDF fought. In the Second Lebanon War in 2006, for example, the air force would only strike targets that were at least five hundred yards from Israeli troops. In the 2024 war, everything was so synchronized and timed that the air force was able to provide cover for maneuvering troops from distances of just a couple dozen yards.

To explain the synchronized way the IDF was working, one of the Israeli officers used an example from ancient Greece. “We were like the phalanx,” he said, referencing the tightly packed rectangular military formation composed of heavy infantrymen armed with spears. The IDF, he explained, was operating in coordinated and protected ways.

The success of the synchronization was a testament to the IDF’s training. The digital applications on the commanders’ computers allowed for quick synchronization between all the units and contributed to the speed and accuracy of the operations.

★ ★ ★

On November 25, 2023, Israel and Hamas agreed to their first fragile truce, during which Israel ceased military operations for two weeks and received in return around one hundred hostages, mostly women and children who had been abducted by Hamas on October 7.

When Hamas refused to uphold its part of the bargain and release another group of women (at the fourteen-month mark of the war, thirteen women were still being held in Gaza), the Israeli government made the grim decision to return to war.

As the fighting resumed in December 2023, the IDF General Staff decided to send the Givati Brigade, crowned with achievements but also

suffering profound grief after losing eleven of its soldiers in the initial IDF offensive, back into Gaza under the command of the 98th Division. Their target—Khan Younis.

Khan Younis was not just another town in Gaza. It was the home of Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas commander, as well as his deputy, Mohammed Deif, the elusive planner of the October 7 massacre. A known Hamas stronghold, it was heavily fortified with hundreds of kilometers of tunnels.

Working alongside IDF special forces, Givati's mission was to hunt down and kill Hamas terrorists while also searching for hostages and their remains. Somewhere in the serpentine tunnels sixty meters beneath the surface, Hamas leaders were believed to be in hiding.

One night, during an operation in the Bnei Suhila suburb on the outskirts of Khan Younis, Boanish's unit came under heavy attack. Hamas terrorists emerged in a coordinated offensive from countless shafts, wearing Israeli helmets, uniforms, and night-vision goggles that they had looted from IDF bases on October 7. The IDF troops struggled to identify who was a soldier and who was a terrorist.

When the operation was over, Lieutenant Colonel Boanish had lost thirteen of his soldiers, and sixty-seven more had been wounded, twenty of whom would not be able to return to combat service.

"That night was really tough," Boanish recalled. "Everything happened to us—every type of engagement. People ask why we didn't just bomb them from the air. Why endanger our fighters? Because we had to try to get to the hostages. Everything was there—tanks, combat helicopters, drones."

"We fought within two to three meters of the terrorists. Our soldiers looked directly into the faces of the enemy," Boanish recounted. "Until then, we had not experienced combat with such intensity. We carried out ambushes of all types, raids at day and at night. We came across explosive devices rigged in civilian apartments, along the streets themselves—things we didn't see in the north of Gaza."

He swallowed hard. "There was a suspicion a hostage was being held alive in the area where we operated. When you tell that to your soldiers, they will charge into any situation. They don't care about the risk—not after seeing how our people were massacred inside their own homes. Short of the word 'Holocaust,' nothing else comes close to describing the pogrom, the

atrocities we witnessed against Jews in those houses. Every time I think about it, I'm shocked all over again."

By this point in the war, in the beginning of 2024, Boanish had not been home for several months. When he finally had time for a brief visit, his wife, Tal, a geneticist with a doctorate from Hebrew University, feared that she might not see him again. A few days earlier, one of their closest friends, Lieutenant Colonel Tomer Greenberg, commander of the Golani Brigade's 13th Battalion, had been killed in a battle in Gaza. Greenberg and Boanish used to spend almost every Friday riding dirt bikes across northern Israel.

Like her husband, Tal didn't let the stress stop her. She joined other wives of Givati officers, visiting the families of the fallen soldiers as well as the wounded in the hospitals.

When we met Boanish near the Gaza border, he was in the middle of reviewing new orders for the continued fight against Hamas's remaining terrorist stronghold in the southern town of Rafah, where Hamas was believed to still have four armed battalions as well as dozens of tunnels that ran along the Gaza-Egyptian border. These tunnels served as its pipeline for advanced Iranian weapons. Without those tunnels, Hamas would have an almost impossible time rearming. Israel knew that the group would fight there until its last breath.

According to Aman, Hamas leaders were also holed up there, surrounded by their families, thousands of terrorists, and most probably many of the hostages.

"The complexity," he told us, "wasn't fighting the enemy, but how to fight alongside a civilian population. These last months, we've learned how to do that.

"I was afraid of it at first. But we have excellent soldiers and, if needed, we can keep fighting like this for years. I've had the privilege of leading one of the army's finest units during a truly historical period for the Jewish people and the nation of Israel."

Beyond the combat obstacles, soldiers also faced mental challenges. Some officers broke down mentally and had a hard time whenever the events of October 7 came up. When videos and pictures would circulate over WhatsApp groups, officers could regularly be seen huddling in a corner crying or holding back tears.

Moshe Mayo, the veteran reservist, did his best to boost morale. “Guys, it is okay to mourn, but remember we are here to fix what went wrong and to ensure that nothing can stop us. Even if we lose a battle we need to put it aside and win the war,” he told the troops.

Another break with past IDF operations was how Cohen, the division commander, spent long chunks of time overseeing the missions from inside Gaza. In the large-scale ground offensive during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, division commanders did not even cross the border. But this time senior officers like Cohen were almost always with their troops. They were not willing to do what their commanders had done seventeen years earlier—watching on plasma screens as they fought in Lebanon. This time they stood shoulder to shoulder with them in the battle to defeat Hamas.

“It gave the field commanders confidence, and gave Cohen confidence in them,” Mayo continued. “He understood that what the brigade and battalion commanders saw on the ground would turn into tomorrow’s operational plans.

“Cohen realized another thing when he was in Gaza—that in combat where everything is fluid, where a target is relevant one minute only to disappear the next, one of the challenges is technology itself. The digital domain makes transferring orders precise down to the exact details, but there are a lot of details that cannot be understood without having boots on the ground and talking directly with the tactical forces.”

During the first few months of fighting, the soldiers of the 162nd Division killed more than 5,000 terrorists; retrieved the bodies of 9 hostages; destroyed terrorist infrastructure; captured 900 prisoners, including participants in the October 7 massacre, and transferred them for interrogation to Israel; and located and destroyed 52 Hamas weapons-production facilities and 367 underground shafts. In total, the division was responsible for breaking up and defeating 12 Hamas battalions, almost half of Hamas’s fighting force.

It came at a price. Dozens of soldiers were killed and hundreds wounded, but the division achieved something even more important than it could imagine—Israel was no longer afraid of entering Gaza, and the country had regained its trust in IDF ground forces. With the outcome of the war still unknown but with additional threats from Hezbollah and others looming on the horizon, this itself was no small victory.

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As expected, when the ground offensive began, the IDF quickly penetrated Hamas's underground bunkers and tunnels, including top Hamas offices. There, the troops often discovered safes that held enormous amounts of documents, maps, computer servers, communications equipment, notebooks, scraps of paper, mobile phones, manuals, portable memory devices, and more.

All of this had to be collected and brought back to Israel, where it would need to be sifted through for any intelligence that could assist in ongoing operations. The problem was that there was no one in the IDF to perform the analysis. A few months before October 7, Aman had closed down the unit responsible for processing computers obtained in enemy territory. Known by the Hebrew acronym Amshat, the unit was no longer considered critical. Aman had figured that individual IDF units could themselves be trained to handle any computers discovered during operations.

In the hours after the October 7 attack, Aman's leadership immediately understood its mistake and sent out emergency call-ups for Amshat reservists. Someone was needed to sift through the data recovered by IDF units.

It became one of the largest real-time intelligence operations in modern history—devices would be sent back to Israel and almost immediately evaluated by someone in Aman or Shin Bet. Some of the hard drives revealed Hamas operational plans—including Excel charts that outlined the training history of the Hamas battalions and special forces as well as ammunition levels, numbers of weapons, and personnel—while others gave Israel insight into the group's thinking, decision-making processes, strategy, and how they had built an armed force that managed to deceive Israel, blind Aman, and outmaneuver the General Staff.

The level of detail was a surprise for the Israeli intelligence community—each fighter was listed by name, role in his unit, and what equipment and weapons he carried with him. There were also protocols from Hamas strategy meetings. "Thousands of interrogations of terrorists would not have yielded such intimate intelligence within such a short period of time," a senior IDF intelligence officer explained.

The documents did not pertain only to Israel. Israeli intelligence analysts were shocked when they discovered Hamas's "book of rules," a list of strict disciplinary measures to ensure that its members knew how to conduct themselves, but also how they were supposed to discipline opponents of the regime in Gaza. For example, documents were found that contained instructions for how to interrogate Palestinians suspected of being gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual. The level of barbarism described in the documents was shocking.

Documents were also found that included detailed recommendations for how Hamas operatives were meant to conduct themselves when traveling in Europe, Jordan, Egypt, the United States, and more. There were suggestions for how to stay under the radar and blend in with local surroundings to avoid drawing the attention of foreign intelligence services.

Aman transferred tons of equipment to Israel from Gaza—including advanced weaponry that originated in Russia, North Korea, Iran, Egypt, and Libya. Engineers and analysts studied the weapons, not only to understand the technology but also, more importantly, to understand where it came from and what route it took to get to the Gaza Strip. This is how, for example, the IDF discovered that the pickup trucks and motorcycles used to raid the kibbutzim on October 7 had come from China and were smuggled into Gaza via tunnels under the Egypt-Gaza border.

About fifteen hundred anti-Semitic books were also found, illustrating the systematic indoctrination that Palestinian schoolchildren have undergone in Gazan schools over the past few decades. Among them was a children's book that teaches kids how to murder Jews as well as *The End of the Jews* by Mahmoud al-Zahar, a cofounder of Hamas and former foreign minister of the Palestinian Authority. Discovered by IDF troops in northern Gaza, the cover of the book shows swords and daggers impaling Stars of David, while Jews are portrayed as drowning in a sea of blood.

The book glorifies the Nazis, with chapters ominously titled "The World's Burning Hatred for the Jews," "The General Corruption of the Jews," and "Reasons to Expel the Jews." It revives ancient blood libels, accusing Jews of using the blood of Christian children in rituals, and perpetuates anti-Semitic stereotypes, portraying Jews as driven by greed and intent on suppressing non-Jewish communities.

Some of the documents also served to illustrate Hamas's corruption and how senior members accumulated assets on the backs of the impoverished Palestinians. Documents showed, for example, how UN apartments designated for refugees were registered in the name of Mohammed Deif's wife, and rental contracts for UN apartments showed that they were owned by Mohammed Sinwar, Yahya Sinwar's terrorist brother.

One discovered booklet included procedures and orders for setting ambushes, carrying out covert observations, and performing operations intended to gather intelligence on the Israeli forces deployed along the border.

The Hamas training booklets included photos taken by Hamas men of IDF units along the border, military bases, jeeps, drones, tanks, and more. Israel might have thought this information was top secret, but Hamas knew almost everything.

In the booklet, a prominent section is dedicated to the role of the "combat photographer," whose job was to document IDF activities: "The photographer needs to be punctual, disciplined, patient, capable of keeping his job a secret, and someone who avoids gossip. All of these traits will make his job easier and allow him to move around the border area without raising any suspicion."

According to the documents, Hamas leadership viewed the "photographer" as a central and strategic role, one just as important as the fighter, since the material filmed could be used to create Palestinian propaganda and incite the local population against Israel.

Altogether, the documents were a treasure trove of intelligence that ultimately showed something simple that the IDF had been blind to: While Israel had directed most of its attention toward Hezbollah and Iran, Hamas had built a large, professional, well-trained, and brutal army right under the nose of the Israeli intelligence community, and this was especially evident underneath Gaza—in the tunnels.

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3

The Tunnel Blindness

On October 7, the phones in Unit 504's war room didn't stop ringing. The last time it was so noisy was almost twenty years earlier, when a sensitive operation in an enemy state had gone terribly wrong.

But the morning of October 7 brought a different kind of tension. Reports flooded in about what was happening in the south along the border with Gaza as well as about a unit member who had been wounded by Hamas gunfire at the Nova Music Festival in the Negev. The headquarters was scrambling to locate him.

Unit 504, which specializes in operating Israeli agents behind enemy lines, is no ordinary military unit. This elite team is the linchpin of Israel's human intelligence operations, or HUMINT, activating and managing secret agents behind enemy lines. Established in 1948, Unit 504 has been at the heart of Israel's most complex operations and wars, yet it, too, had grown complacent and ignored the growing threat from Gaza.

While Shin Bet zeroed in on Gaza and Mossad on Iran and Syria, Unit 504 concentrated mostly on Lebanon. Consequently, the IDF had almost no human agents in Gaza before October 7, leaving the military blindsided by the attack.

The news of the soldier's plight spread quickly throughout the unit's ranks, and his comrades rushed to base. Without special instructions from senior command, they donned uniforms, picked up assault rifles, pistols, ammunition, and protective gear, and began a frantic drive south to rescue their friend. Midway there, a report came in from Shaldag, a special air

force commando unit, that had flown to the festival area by helicopter: after fierce battles with Hamas terrorists, they had managed to rescue the wounded fighter and transfer him to a hospital.

Some soldiers considered turning back, but chaos reigned in the south, and they knew that they could help. G, the commander of Unit 504's combat platoon—names of unit members are classified—ordered the convoy to the Gaza border. They arrived at Kibbutz Be'eri and fought the terrorists until late that night.

Their involvement in the battles was a stark reminder of the general disarray and chaos that reigned in Israel—Unit 504 never engages in such operations. But with the IDF's top command not functioning, every available hand and gun was needed, even units like 504, which usually are reserved for strategic covert operations.

"We went house to house and assisted in rescuing about a hundred civilians, something that is not what we usually do," G explained. "We are used to conducting operations in faraway places, but the situation changed, and we became a unit that also responds to terrorist incidents."

As night fell on October 7, with intelligence indicating that Hezbollah, Iran, and Shiite militias might join the fray, the fighters returned to base near Tel Aviv to await new orders. Veterans of the unit voiced frustration over neglecting Gaza for years and felt sadness that they, too, had contributed to Israel's unpreparedness. Many wondered how things could have worked out differently if they had run agents in Gaza. Maybe an agent of theirs would have been among the thousands of terrorists who flooded Israel earlier that day and would have been able to give a warning ahead of time. The questions and doubts were painful.

Despite their exhaustion and anger, they knew that the unit's focus on other arenas was just one example of the blindness that had befallen the IDF, leading intelligence officers to mistakenly believe that cyber operations and listening to enemy phone calls was enough to uncover the secrets in Gaza and Lebanon.

As the days passed and evidence of atrocities accumulated, Aman was left reeling, shocked by Hamas's achievements and its own failures. The head of Unit 504, Colonel D, met with his senior staff and decided to deploy the unit to Gaza. Unit 504 had significant operational and

technological capabilities, and D knew that it could make a difference in the war that had now been forced upon Israel.

D froze all other operations, diverting resources to Gaza to locate the tunnels of senior Hamas officials, who were believed to be using hostages as human shields. Early intelligence suggested tunnels descending sixty meters, with hostages possibly kept in locked iron cages.

“Gaza has knocked hard on our door,” platoon commander G told his team. “We have received a special mission—to enter the underground world, to locate, scan, and bring home the civilians and soldiers.”

This wasn’t a natural operation for the secretive unit, whose members are used to moving in the shadows. Unit 504 soldiers operate in civilian clothing, often overseas, from what is best described as a top-secret hub. There are three categories of operatives associated with the unit: The spies who operate behind enemy lines, infiltrating militaries and terrorist groups or embedding themselves in civilian settings to gather intelligence. There are the handlers, the people who manage the spies and their operations. These are protected by the third category, the fighters, a group of elite soldiers who not only are trained in the highest levels of IDF combat but also learn to blend in with their surroundings and operate in a way that does not reveal the agents and handlers they are protecting.

Trained in grueling conditions, the handlers are awarded at the end of their training pins with wings cradling a piece of basalt stone from Syria, symbolizing the heavy burden they carry to protect Israel far from its borders. Their training, including a nine-month course in Arabic, covers intelligence gathering, hand-to-hand combat, and advanced firearms operation. They live in the shadows, where even the slightest exposure could result in instant death.

In March, just seven months before the war, the unit received a citation from top IDF brass for an operation that was described as “groundbreaking,” “dramatically changing the operational picture of the northern front.” While the IDF did not reveal exactly what that meant, the operation may have involved recruiting top-secret agents who succeeded in providing sensitive and accurate intelligence that gave Israel a new advantage on the battlefield.

That glory did not last long. Nevertheless, Unit 504 enlisted in its entirety for the new mission, and as the IDF’s 162nd Division prepared the

ground offensive, Unit 504's intelligence officers began poring over every piece of available information on the tunnels and potential escape routes that Hamas could use to smuggle out hostages. The focus on Syria and Lebanon was put aside. While it is true that they were important areas of operation, all hands were now on deck for Gaza.

When the IDF incursion began, Unit 504 operatives were at the front, sometimes entering suspicious homes first, on the lookout for any hints that hostages had been there. They were the first to interrogate captured Hamas men, often still in the field, and would continue the interrogations back in Israel where they also ran a special command center to glean information from Palestinians and warn them to evacuate their homes. They questioned hundreds of terrorists from all the different organizations in the Gaza Strip, who provided locations of terror tunnels, headquarters, and ammunition depots and exposed Hamas's methods of operation and concealment.

The interrogations also revealed how Hamas used barbaric tactics against their own people. One Hamas operative, Zohadi Ali Zahadi Shahin, admitted in his interrogation with Unit 504 that Hamas stopped Gazans trying to flee areas where the IDF was operating and transferred them to al-Shifa Hospital. At the hospital, the civilians were gathered on the ground floor, and the terrorists stayed in tunnels beneath them until they saw that the IDF was coming, at which point they hid among the civilians. He described how Hamas would threaten local Palestinians, forcing them to hide weapons and explosives.

He told a story of one Hamas terrorist who was hiding a bomb next to the front door of another Palestinian's home. "'If you don't like it, get out of here,' the Hamas operative told [the homeowner]. 'It's none of your business.'" The man replied: "How is it none of my business? These are my children; it's not okay." And the Hamas operative told him, "This is the explosive. I will plant it even if you don't like it—and I'll even put it between you and your wife."

The real-time intelligence collected in the field proved critical in mapping out Hamas's tunnel network and providing a better understanding of the methods Hamas used to blend into the local civilian population.

In addition, Unit 504's technological team developed a 360-degree virtual-reality (VR) device to train soldiers by allowing them to see and feel what it is like to be in battles on the streets of Gaza. The VR program was

based on videos of real locations taken by Palestinians in Gaza working on behalf of the unit.

The unit did not find immediate success. The work was Sisyphean, with highs from finding a tunnel paired with the lows of discovering nothing of value inside. Some in the unit started to wonder what they were even doing in the field. Yes, October 7 was a massacre of unprecedented proportions, and yes, the IDF failure still hurt every time soldiers thought about it; still, the unit was used to running strategic intelligence operations, not field operations with brigades and battalions.

A turning point came in December 2023, on the fifth night of Hanukkah, when they received intelligence pointing to a tunnel complex where Hamas was believed to have hid the bodies of some kidnapped Israelis. It was a night no member of the unit will ever forget. After moving into positions around the tunnel hatches, the force came under fierce fire from nearby Hamas cells. The soldiers called in air cover to engage the Hamas anti-tank squads, and despite the frequent ground-shaking explosions, the fighters focused on keeping the Hamas terrorists at bay while they analyzed the tunnel with the help of Samur, Hebrew for "weasel," an engineering unit that specializes in tunnel warfare.

No one knew what to expect inside the tunnels, except that they were almost certainly booby-trapped and could collapse at any moment. Cohen, commander of the 162nd Division, arrived at the scene. While some of the soldiers expressed skepticism that they would find anything, Cohen's gut told him that something was down there and that there was a chance that they would find the bodies of some of the hostages.

"This was a complicated operation, and we didn't know what to expect —whose bodies would be there and in what condition. We only knew from intelligence that there is a high chance that Israeli bodies are there," explained C, one of the unit's senior commanders. "One thing was clear: we needed to get our people out, and to do that, we were willing to do anything."

Firefights broke out near the entrance to the tunnel, and, while the intelligence pointed to bodies inside, there was no physical evidence to back it up. The soldiers feared going down and getting lost. A terrible stench emanated from the tunnel, and oxygen levels were low. Communicating with the commanders above was almost impossible.

“Remember that there is someone at home who loves the hostages we are looking for and is waiting for them,” G, the platoon commander, told the men.

For G, it was clear from the beginning that the unit would do whatever it needed to get to the bodies if they were there. “This is the glimmer of light in the darkness that started on October seventh. In the end, what stands before a soldier is the mission to retrieve our brothers and sisters who deserve to be buried in Israel,” he explained.

In the end, after hours of searching, two bodies were located inside the tunnel—civilian Eden Zacharia and IDF warrant officer Ziv Dado. “Dado’s wife told us that even if the result was not what she prayed for—to bring him home alive—she wouldn’t have peace until his body was returned and there was a grave,” he recalled.

S, a twenty-eight-year-old field officer who led part of the operation, said that while he didn’t initially believe that the soldiers would find the specific tunnel where the bodies were because of the extensive size of the underground complex, no one was willing to give up before the mission was accomplished.

“For me, personally, it was the holiest of missions. There is nothing more important. We put the bodies on stretchers, covered them with the Israeli flag. Everyone went silent. We were emotional. Soldiers had tears in their eyes. We entered Gaza with our brothers and left with more of our brothers. This was the most significant operation of my service. Bringing our people back for burial in Israel from the darkest of places. There were difficult moments—the noise, the smell, the look. In the end we prayed in our hearts, vowing not to leave until we reach all our people, even if it takes us to the darkest, deepest places like the tunnels we went into.”

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The operation involving Unit 504 was just one example of how unprepared Israel and the IDF were for the Hamas attacks on October 7. The unit, one of Israel’s best, was not even thinking about Gaza as a target until the morning of the attack. It didn’t have spies there, didn’t have intelligence, and while its soldiers spoke fluent Arabic, they were focused on other areas

of operation, but not Gaza, a place that was supposed to be no more than a tactical threat to the State of Israel.

However, by December, the unit had become one of the most strategic weapons the IDF had deployed in Gaza. Unit 504 reestablished intelligence capabilities there, helped identify targets, interrogated hundreds of Hamas operatives, and provided critical information about the locations of Hamas tunnel networks and weapons depots, as well as about the terror group's operational methods, including the use of human shields.

They were crucial to filling in the intelligence gaps about Gaza's tunnel system. In Jewish tradition, there is a reference to two types of Jerusalem—the Jerusalem of above (heaven) and Jerusalem of below (the city of today). There are two Gazas as well—an aboveground Gaza whose buildings are visible to the world, and an invisible, extensive underground Gaza. The problem was, no one in Israel really knew what was happening in the underground Gaza. This strategic blindness would cause the war to drag on for months longer than initially anticipated.

The tunnels in Gaza first came up on Israel's radar in the late 1980s after the formation of Hamas and its metamorphosis into a formidable force in Gaza. Early on, Hamas operatives were tasked with digging tunnels, at first under what is known as the "Philadelphi Corridor," the strip of land that separates Gaza and Egypt.

These tunnels—by 2024, the IDF estimated that there were more than 150 of them under the corridor—were used to smuggle weapons, ammunition, and regular goods from the outside world into Gaza. Local crime families became skilled at digging the tunnels quickly and deeply, and when the Second Intifada broke out in 2000 and Israel clamped down on the flow of regular goods into Gaza, their efforts intensified. This phase saw the utilization of tunnels for deadly attacks against IDF troops, such as infiltrating Israeli military outposts or planting explosives under IDF positions along the Egyptian border and then detonating them. Between 2001 and 2004, Hamas operatives killed a number of IDF soldiers using tunnels filled with explosives. During these years, the IDF's engineering units worked to uncover and destroy the tunnels, often encountering ambushes from Hamas units armed with anti-tank missiles.

In 2005, Israel famously withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip, and a year later, terrorists used a half-mile-long tunnel to infiltrate 250 yards

into Israel near Kerem Shalom in southern Gaza. The terrorists attacked a tank parked along the border, killing two soldiers, wounding four, and abducting another, Gilad Shalit.

Subsequent investigations and scans of the border revealed another tunnel that had been ready to use. The IDF destroyed it, and in the following year, the IDF and Shin Bet located nine more cross-border Hamas tunnels, some of which already penetrated deep into Israel or were close to crossing the border.

Hamas's success in abducting Shalit encouraged all terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip to dig cross-border attack tunnels for similar operations. In 2007, for example, Israeli intelligence revealed seven more terrorist tunnels.

In December 2008, the government decided to launch Operation Cast Lead to try to stop the increasing rocket attacks against Israeli towns in the south. It targeted six attack tunnels and another forty supply tunnels along the Philadelphi Corridor, mostly from the air, and only a few from the ground. Although Hamas could not stop the IDF units maneuvering through Gaza, the top political and military leaders managed to hide in the tunnels and survive the Israeli aerial bombings.

When the operation ended, Hamas commanders continued to develop the cross-border attack tunnels, digging them faster and deeper while reinforcing them with concrete walls to prevent them from collapsing.

Between 2008 and 2009, the IDF attacked over one hundred tunnels belonging to various terrorist organizations in Gaza; they destroyed another twenty-four tunnels in 2010, and ten more the following year.

In 2012, the IDF launched Operation Pillar of Defense, attacking terrorist operatives and some twenty tunnels. The operation's airstrikes did not irreversibly destroy these tunnels, and Aman and Shin Bet told the cabinet that the tunnels had only been damaged, but Netanyahu rejected their recommendation to send troops into Gaza. He told them to keep hitting from the air and to do a better job.

In 2013, a previously unmapped tunnel was discovered in Israeli territory after the ground above it sank in. When engineering forces arrived to destroy it, a powerful bomb went off, injuring five soldiers. The incident highlighted the need for Aman and Shin Bet to prioritize the tunnel threat when allocating their intelligence-gathering resources.

In 2014, the head of Shin Bet at the time, Yoram Cohen, designated the tunnel threat as one of the agency's top priorities. The head of Aman at the time, Aviv Kohavi, who would later become the IDF chief of staff, warned of attempts by Hamas and Hezbollah to construct dozens of miles of tunnels throughout Gaza and Lebanon. Other intelligence officers warned that Hamas aimed to infiltrate Israeli territory with its cross-border attack tunnels so that fighters could attack civilian and military facilities and sow confusion within the home front. The officers spoke openly about a 9/11-scale massacre inside Israel if Hamas was successful. One Israeli mayor in the south urged the defense minister at the time to prevent the transfer of cement and metal to Gaza that could be used to build terrorist tunnels.

Later that year, another conflict broke out with Hamas in Gaza, this one sparked by the abduction of three Israeli high school students in the West Bank. In the beginning, Israel operated strictly from the air, but then Hamas fighters started popping out of tunnels inside Israel and ambushing IDF soldiers.

After fifty-one days of fighting, dozens of tunnels were destroyed, but many still remained, and Hamas was not defeated. Israel had spent the war focused solely on the cross-border tunnels, but not the huge network that crisscrossed Gaza. The tunnels inside Gaza were not perceived as a direct threat to Israel since they were used mostly by Hamas fighters moving within Gaza. IDF troops later admitted that they had discovered tunnel shafts inside the Gaza Strip but did not have the means or tactics to destroy them.

But Israel cared less about those extensive internal tunnel networks. They were isolated inside Gaza, and they were really only a problem during airstrikes since they provided Hamas commanders with a place to hide. What bothered Israel were the tunnels under the border, the ones Hamas and Islamic Jihad could use to infiltrate Israel.

In 2015, the IDF chief of staff at the time, Gadi Eisenkot—in 2024, he would serve as a minister in the war cabinet—stated that the cross-border tunnel threat was the most serious challenge for Israel. The fear that Hamas and other terrorist organizations would use these tunnels to attack Israeli territory was clear and present.

Still, the government continued to drag its feet. It was clear to the IDF and Shin Bet that Hamas was using imported construction materials funded

by foreign donors to build its tunnels, but nothing was done. While some politicians and officers pushed for a ground offensive, the ministers and the top IDF brass consistently chose an asymmetric approach. They would attack isolated tunnels, but never the entire labyrinth.

To prevent infiltrations, the IDF prioritized efforts to erect an underground wall to block tunnels from entering Israel, embedding advanced sensors to detect excavations in real time. The IDF generals also believed that a strong, high fence along the border with Gaza, similar to the one that had been erected along the Egyptian border, would stop aboveground infiltrations as well.

While these barriers cost billions of dollars to build, defense officials believed that with them, Israel would be safe.

How wrong they were.

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In December 2017, a massive explosion rocked the Western Negev, and the IDF confirmed that it had, for the first time, successfully located and destroyed an attack tunnel belonging to Islamic Jihad. The tunnels were no longer just the province of Hamas. Other terrorist groups were trying to cross into Israel. Just like Islamic Jihad had its own rocket arsenal, it now also had its own tunnel network.

But that is not what the Israeli media focused on. Instead of writing about the expansion of the threat, the operation was hailed as a technological breakthrough since the tunnel was detected using the new underground sensors.

And the breakthrough was indeed a classic case of IDF innovative ingenuity.

After the 2014 war, during which Hamas terrorists infiltrated Israel through cross-border tunnels, the urgency to deal with the threat didn’t need any explaining. Rumors spread quickly in the Western Negev about possible tunnels being dug under kibbutz homes, and every report from farmers of strange tremors or noises near the border was thoroughly investigated. Despite multiple failed projects, the IDF kept at it, establishing special development teams and consulting with officials from all over the world.

Laboratories were set up to test the new technologies, and teams were divided according to the different proposed methods.

In May 2016, Yehuda Fox, a veteran infantry commander who had climbed the ranks in the Nahal Brigade, took over as commander of the Gaza Division. A day before the official ceremony, there was a farewell dinner for the commander he was replacing. One of the brigade officers took the stage and described—to the laughter of the hundreds of officers present—how disorganized the meetings were regarding the development of the tunnel-detection technology. "They were run like a *shuk*," the officer said. "People would throw out ideas, and occasionally some panned out and were successful." Fox, sitting in the front row, immediately realized how complex the situation was and how far Israel was from a solution.

In his new role, Fox conducted an in-depth investigation into the previous efforts to develop a detection system and reviewed the hundreds of proposals that had been compiled by the Southern Command.

While dozens of engineering teams from Israel and around the world were busy building the forty-mile underground wall along the Gaza border, Fox decided to convene all of the various stakeholders in the tunnel-detection process. He knew that it was one thing to build an underground wall to stop a tunnel, but it was quite another to be able to identify and locate a tunnel in its initial stages. If you could detect and destroy it early, he thought, then the wall would not even be needed.

One by one, representatives presented their ideas for how to detect the digging of a tunnel. It became clear that bureaucracy and compartmentalization between the groups was hindering progress. Fox decided to convene a group known as the "Seven," which included representatives from the IDF, the Defense Ministry, and Shin Bet.

In their first discussion, Aman revealed to the Seven that Hamas operated generators underground, and that identifying the noise could help locate the tunnels. "The tunnels that we already know about are not interesting," Fox told the group one day. "It's like having the answer to a math exercise without knowing the formula to get to the solution. I want to figure out the way to locate new tunnels."

Concerns arose that new tunnels might be built using multiple methods, and the team feared that some might already cross into Israeli territory in areas where the Ministry of Defense had not yet completed the underground

wall. They decided to integrate intelligence collection into their technological efforts to improve the accuracy of the system they were trying to design.

When intelligence officers presented evidence of a new tunnel, the team's lab placed sensors in the ground to listen for noises and signals. Recordings from these sensors were then decoded by a group of experts from Israeli defense companies and academic institutions. The idea was to use the noises to create an algorithm that could then identify other tunnels that were being dug.

The gatherings of the Seven led to the creation of an operational, technological, and intelligence triangle, with each arm complementing the others. Fox would often travel to the team's command post near the border and listen to the noises from the sensors. One day, he watched as the team got excited by signals that suggested a tunnel. After a few hours, though, they determined that the sound came from two trees rubbing together, transmitting vibrations through their roots that mimicked the noise of excavation work.

As more sounds were recorded and tested in laboratories, the identification process to determine what was a tunnel and what wasn't took even longer due to the enormous amounts of data. Someone came up with the idea of installing sensors in holes drilled deep into the ground and the team brought over a sonar expert from the navy's submarine fleet, known for his ability to quickly identify underwater sounds to such a degree that he could determine the exact type of ship picked up by sonar. Together with his assistant, the sonar expert quickly developed tools to identify what implement was being used to dig a tunnel—a pickax, a shovel, or something mechanical.

"Just like we make mistakes, they will also make mistakes," Fox told the teams. "Just be patient. It will happen. When it rains, it rains on both sides."

The tunnel-detection teams installed various technological sensors along the border in deep pits. While Hamas reconnaissance squads watched, the navy's sonar expert used the sensors to locate a tunnel being dug far from the fence.

The technological solution worked so well that the Gaza Division felt it was now capable of knowing how many Palestinian workers entered a

tunnel and how many were trying to cross into Israeli territory. They believed they knew exactly when the diggers went down a shaft, which direction they were digging, when they were dragging sacks filled with earth out of the tunnel, and when they started operating machines that dug faster.

But Fox still felt uneasy. “I would drive my jeep along the border, and I knew they were digging underneath me,” he recalled a few years later. “There was no way I was willing to accept that.”

In talks with the General Staff, Fox recommended striking the tunnels near the border, but the top IDF brass resisted. While tunnels were being dug and Hamas was arming itself to the teeth, Israel was experiencing a period of relative calm, and some generals feared that an isolated airstrike against a tunnel would lead to a full-out war with Hamas. Israel did not want that.

To ease the concern of the General Staff, Fox came up with what initially seemed like a crazy idea. The air force, he said, did not need to attack in Gaza. “I want to attack the tunnel in Israeli territory,” the division commander told the chief of staff, explaining that, in the end, it was about dismantling the tunnel and preventing it from being used by Hamas.

The top IDF command held a long discussion on the proposal, mostly to ensure that no Israelis would be in danger. With their approval, Fox gave his men the green light. The sonar expert listened for a tunnel, and once he identified one, he was able to determine that diggers were in the tunnel and on their way to the Israeli side. The team called in the information and quickly left the border area. An aircraft that was hovering above ahead of time dropped a bomb and hit the tunnel with precision.

Six terrorist operatives were killed in the strike, and during the rescue efforts, another eight Palestinians died. Top Hamas and Islamic Jihad commanders came to see the attacked tunnel with their own eyes. Most importantly, Fox was right: intelligence later showed that since the tunnel was attacked in Israeli territory, Hamas did not feel compelled to respond.

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By the end of 2018, Fox and the Gaza Division had succeeded in locating fifteen attack tunnels along the Gaza border. This achievement came amid

additional threats, such as demonstrations by thousands of Palestinians along the fence, violent disturbances, grenade and explosives attacks on IDF soldiers deployed along the border, infiltration attempts by terrorist squads, rocket and mortar fire, fence damage, and more.

While the top levels of the security and political establishments were enthusiastic about the technological-intelligence-operational capability that Fox's team had developed, Hamas was not sitting idly by.

The Gaza Division was so focused on detecting and destroying cross-border tunnels that it neglected two of the main challenges from Gaza. First, no one ever imagined that thousands of terrorists would simply blow holes in the border fence and cross unopposed into Israel. Fewer than four infantry and armored battalions were defending the border on October 7, a force posture that cannot be allowed in the future.

At the same time, while the IDF had taken pride in neutralizing the cross-border attack tunnels that could be used for infiltrations, very little was being done to try to stop Hamas from digging an underground city beneath Gaza, the place that would soon enough turn into a terror dungeon for 251 hostages.

And while there was undoubtedly success in neutralizing the cross-border tunnels, some people didn't buy into the quiet.

In November 2018, a covert IDF operation in the southern Gaza Strip went awry. Undercover Israeli commandos inside Gaza on a daring operation raised suspicion at a Hamas checkpoint. A gunfight ensued, and a decorated officer was shot and killed. In response, Hamas fired dozens of rockets into Israel as the IDF launched a special mission to rescue the remaining troops.

Prime Minister Netanyahu convened the security cabinet to discuss Israel's response. Avigdor Lieberman, defense minister at the time, pushed to launch Operation Lightning Strike, the code name the IDF had given the campaign to destroy the tunnels, a simulation of which he had personally overseen a few months earlier.

The IDF brass resisted. It was in the final stages of preparing to destroy a series of Hezbollah tunnels crossing from Lebanon into Israel that the IDF had recently discovered. Within Military Intelligence, there were concerns that launching Operation Lightning Strike could lead to a larger and longer conflict with Gaza, which would force the IDF to postpone the operation

against Hezbollah's tunnels—and the longer it waited, the greater the chance that something would leak, which would force Hezbollah to use its tunnels.

The cabinet sided with the IDF, and Lightning Strike was put on ice. Upset by the government's weak response to the Gaza rocket fire, Lieberman resigned from the cabinet. His departure eventually led to the disintegration of the government and the first of what would turn into five national elections in just three and a half years.

In May 2021, the false quiet was shattered again.

With tension rising over the Temple Mount ahead of Jerusalem Day—the Israeli holiday that marks the reunification of Jerusalem during the 1967 Six-Day War—Hamas decided to fire rockets into Jerusalem. It was an attempt by the group to claim ownership of the Temple Mount and emerge as the true leader of the Palestinian people and its resistance.

Israel decided to retaliate harshly and launched Operation Guardian of the Walls, striking thirty targets in the heart of the Gaza Strip in its opening salvo. In response, Hamas ordered eighteen fighters from its elite Nukhba unit—the unit of many of the October 7 terrorists—to enter a cross-border tunnel and infiltrate Israel with the aim of kidnapping a soldier. Israeli intelligence detected their presence, and the air force was ordered to attack the tunnel with the terrorists inside.

While the air strike stopped the attack, Hamas's decision to send fighters into the tunnel was a clear message to Israel that the terrorist group was serious and not afraid to escalate the situation.

In response, the IDF chief of staff at the time, Aviv Kohavi, approved an operation called City of Refuge that was to target forty bunkers, mostly controlled by Hamas company commanders. One target was particularly significant: about twenty-five meters under the heart of Gaza City and hidden within a complex network of tunnels, it served as something of a base of operations for Hamas's top R&D and weapons-production teams. The bunker was strategically located beneath civilian apartment buildings, presenting Israeli forces with an immense challenge. It had four different escape routes to a larger network. It consisted of numerous rooms connected by tunnels, and even included an electric conveyor belt used to quickly move weapons in and out of the space.

On the one hand, the IDF was finally hitting some of the internal tunnel networks inside Gaza and not just focusing on the cross-border attack tunnels. On the other hand, Israel had to time the attack when the senior terrorists would be inside, hit all the escape routes, and do everything it could to avoid civilian casualties. After extensive planning and training, the air force said it was ready, and Kohavi gave the order. Within four minutes, the air force attacked more than ten shafts leading to the underground complex.

"We told ourselves that if we couldn't attack the heart of their bunker, we would attack the openings and bury them," said a source involved in the planning. The results were impressive—Israel had accurately struck a tunnel complex inside Gaza and eliminated key figures in Hamas's weapons-production wing.

After the successful operation, IDF chief of staff Kohavi decided that the next major target would be a massive tunnel network connecting Gaza City with the southern town of Khan Younis and most of the northern Gaza Strip. One of the intelligence officers named it the "Metro," comparing its size to underground transportation systems in New York, London, and Paris.

Kohavi had worked on the plan for months, and during his term as chief of staff, he became known for his diligence and creativity, incorporating new technology—from artificial intelligence software that helped identify targets to new missile defense systems and more—into service.

Born in April 1964 in a middle-class suburb of the northern city of Haifa, Kohavi was the second of three children to a father who owned a small supplies business and a mother who was a legend as a local high-school gym teacher. The home was full of music, art, and literature, an atmosphere that would have a big impact on a young Aviv, who would become the first IDF chief of staff who was a vegan and had multiple degrees in philosophy.

When his time came in 1982 to enlist in the IDF, Kohavi tried out for the prestigious Paratroopers Brigade and got in. He spent the next twenty-five years in combat roles, securing the brigade's top command post in 2001 at the height of the Second Intifada as Israel was fighting daily to stop Palestinian suicide bombers from blowing up buses, coffee shops, and restaurants.

One operation brought Kohavi and his men to the Balata refugee camp just outside of Nablus, home at the time to around twenty-five thousand people in just a quarter of a square kilometer, making it—like Gaza—one of the most densely populated places in the world.

The Palestinian terrorists in Balata had used the time to prepare for the IDF. Hundreds of gunmen had set up positions in the camp, digging trenches and booby-trapping front doors and narrow passageways. It was as if the Palestinian gunmen were defiantly daring Israel to send its troops inside.

Kohavi knew that if his troops walked straight in, the ensuing battle would be a bloodbath for the Israeli soldiers, the Palestinian gunmen, and, potentially, the local residents.

Kohavi sent his battalions to surround the camp. One took up position to the northeast; another deployed to the southeast. He wanted the Palestinians to think that he was going to order his men straight into the death traps they had set for them. But then, instead of going into the streets, soldiers entered the homes and buildings on the outskirts and started crossing from one structure to the next. They were literally walking through the walls, hammering through them or blowing holes in them with small explosive charges.

This protected the soldiers but also had another result—it forced the Palestinian gunmen into the streets where the soldiers—now covered inside homes—could engage them from a point of cover in precise blows. The operation took four days, and while Kohavi lost one soldier to enemy fire, some twenty gunmen were killed and dozens more arrested. It was a resounding success.

Kohavi continued to climb the ranks in the IDF, serving as head of the Gaza Division, then the Operations Division, then Aman, and then the Northern Command before taking up the top military role.

Kohavi had the outline of the entire Gaza Metro brought to his office and saw how a simple strike would not be possible. Bombing any of the bunkers without proper planning would bring down buildings full of innocent civilians. Israel had bombed tunnel shafts before, but it had never tried to take out an entire underground complex at once.

The Metro had been in Israel’s sights for a couple of years and the IDF and Shin Bet had invested unprecedented resources in gleaning as much

information as they could about the tunnel network.

Kohavi ordered his staff to work on two different tracks. The first was to gather every possible piece of intelligence—find the tunnels and map them out to exact detail. The second was to develop attack capabilities and tactics that could destroy only the part that Israel wanted to hit.

The information that Israel gathered varied in quality. For some sections of the network, Israeli intelligence was able to draw an exact picture, learning from sources what weapons were stored there, where they were, what type of communication network was installed, and on which wall TV screens hung. For other sections, the route the tunnel traveled was available, but nothing more.

Due to the size of the network and the need to surprise the enemy, the initial operational requirement was for more than one hundred aircraft to drop five hundred bombs in less than thirty minutes. It was an operation the scale of which had not been seen before in the Gaza Strip.

For the plan to succeed, as many Hamas men as possible needed to be inside the Metro. To do that, Kohavi approved a plan to lure the terrorists inside. To deceive Hamas, the IDF, as it had done in previous operations, had assembled tanks and infantry forces along the Gaza border. However, since the IDF did not often use these forces operationally, Hamas believed that they would remain idle this time as well.

At midnight though, the IDF spokesperson's English department tweeted, "IDF air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip." Foreign media jumped at the tweet, interpreting it to mean that Israel was sending ground forces into Gaza, a major escalation in the current operation and a sign that it was far from over. Media outlets around the world reported the incursion. "Israeli troops have entered the Gaza Strip as conflict with Palestinians escalates, Israeli military says," was the tweet put out by *The Washington Post*.

But there was no ground invasion. The IDF troops deployed along the border did not cross into Gaza. The false information leak was aimed at getting Hamas and Islamic Jihad to send their first line of defense into the tunnels to start taking up positions. These were the anti-tank missile teams and mortar squads meant to strike at incoming Israeli ground forces.

Instead, what was really happening was in the air, where 160 fighter jets were waiting over the Mediterranean Sea. The planes—F-15s and F-16s

—were loaded with GPS-guided bombs, many of them GBU-39s, also known as the Small Diameter Bomb (SDB), a small, accurate weapon made by Boeing that has the ability to penetrate steel-reinforced concrete. Since they are relatively small, Israel's F-151s—known by their Hebrew name "Ra'am" (thunder)—can carry twenty SDBs on their wings and fuselage known by their Hebrew name "Barad Katlani" (lethal hail).

The planes dove in several waves, dropping their bombs with supreme accuracy. The entire mission took a mere twenty-three minutes. The mission had been dubbed "Goliath's City" after the Philistine giant who was struck down by King David in the Book of Samuel.

Unfortunately, Hamas did not fall for the trap, and the operation only killed a few dozen terrorists. While the IDF tried to downplay the failure, the criticism from within the defense establishment was significant. Former officials warned that the IDF had wasted a joker card and had prematurely attacked the tunnels. They argued that it should have held the opportunity for a later date.

Despite the criticism, Kohavi defended his decision, arguing that the airstrike was justified given the circumstances and that the operation had taught Hamas an important lesson.

"Hamas made a serious mistake," he said a couple of weeks later, taking pride in the strikes against the Metro and the ability to eliminate a few dozen terrorists within the tunnels.

"When I look at the balance of achievements there is no question at all," Kohavi went on to say. "We were much more successful than Hamas. There is no doubt at all."

Netanyahu, the prime minister, also hailed the operation, claiming that it had boosted Israel's deterrence. Israel, he said, fulfilled its objective of dealing Hamas a "blow it cannot imagine" by destroying a terror tunnel network it had built in Gaza. He celebrated the destruction of "more than 100 kilometers" of the tunnel network, which he claimed, without evidence, that the IDF had turned into "a death trap for the terrorists."

Kohavi and Netanyahu could not have been more mistaken. Not only was the attack on the Metro almost negligible at the time it was carried out in 2021, but when the IDF entered the Gaza Strip just two years later in the aftermath of October 7, soldiers wondered what tunnels had actually been destroyed during Guardian of the Walls. After a year of operating inside

Gaza, the IDF in 2024 openly admitted its discovery that Hamas had dug more than three hundred miles of tunnels that crisscrossed the entire length and width of the Hamas-controlled territory.

How Israel missed all of this was a question that many in the IDF wondered in the months after October 7. Israel, it seems, suffered from a mix of hubris and faulty intelligence, believing that the strikes against the Hamas engineers and the so-called Metro were far more important than they really were.

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Israel misread what was happening and then drew mistaken operational decisions from it. June 2022 was another stop in this mistaken journey.

That summer, the IDF's Southern Command revealed its new defensive plan for the Gaza border. Called "Hourglass," the underground wall and the new fence built along the border were lined with sensors, cameras, and remote-controlled heavy guns. The Southern Command believed that this combination of technology and weapons would be effective in deterring attacks by Palestinian mobs and allow ground forces to intercept potential intruders with drones and quadcopters.

Believing the border was protected and Hamas was deterred, Kohavi approved the downsizing of the security force deployed there by a battalion, which is approximately one thousand soldiers.

When journalists questioned the new plan and the reduction in force, senior officers said that the IDF had already successfully thwarted most of the terrorist attacks Hamas and Islamic Jihad tried to launch during Guardian of the Walls and that both groups knew it. The officers highlighted a significant drop in rocket attacks, with only eleven fired in the year following the operation compared to nearly three hundred fired into Israel in 2009, the year after Operation Cast Lead, and fifty-seven fired the year after the Gaza war in the summer of 2014.

The public message from the IDF was simple—we know what we are doing.

Despite the IDF's excitement and the government's post-operation confidence, Hamas almost immediately began restoring its capabilities. Senior officers in the Southern Command acknowledged that new tunnels

were being dug and that Hamas was acquiring new capabilities, like motorized paragliders, that it could one day use to fly over the border.

The confidence in Jerusalem that long-term quiet had been achieved was so strong that the government decided—shortly after the operation—to start allowing Gazan workers into Israel for the first time in years, hoping that a "carrot-and-stick" approach would continue to restrain Hamas. While Netanyahu had refused to allow in the workers, the new government, led by Naftali Bennett, that took office in June 2021 decided to incrementally raise the number.

"I established a rule—if there is quiet, we will allow in workers," Bennett later explained on Twitter. "There were several weeks of quiet, so we brought in 2,000 workers. The quiet from Gaza continued, so we increased the quota to 5,000. The enthusiasm among the residents of Gaza was enormous … and as the lull continued, we increased the number to 14,000."

By March 2022, the number of workers had increased to twenty thousand, and Bennett explained why: "A worker in Gaza makes NIS eight hundred a month, and in Israel he makes ten times that—NIS eight thousand!"

While Bennett was celebrating the quiet, Hamas, led by Sinwar, was preparing for war. Some of the workers who were allowed in by Israel helped provide Hamas with intelligence on the kibbutzim attacked on October 7—mapping out where people lived, which homes had pets, and more.

Israel thought Hamas was deterred, but in reality, it was accelerating rocket production and training for future conflicts, even conducting public exercises.

On October 7 though, the entire tunnel defense apparatus that Israel had created was irrelevant. Not a single Hamas terrorist crossed into Israel through a tunnel. Instead, they infiltrated via sixty different locations along the border—on foot, in pickup trucks, on boats, on paragliders, and even in golf carts.

It was the greatest terrorist infiltration in Israeli history, and no one was ready. Israel thought it knew about the tunnels and where most of them were. What was thought to be 150 miles of tunnels, only capable of being used for short periods of time, turned out to be more than 300 miles of

tunnels with different levels, offshoots, and facilities—such as bathrooms and kitchens—powered by generators, and capable of being used without limitation.

These were not tunnels to be used just for sneaking up and ambushing IDF tanks. This was an entire world built under the Gaza Strip.

The tunnel network under Gaza was like nothing seen before in modern warfare. Yes, the Vietcong had used tunnels in Vietnam in the 1960s, and yes, North Korea had developed an expertise in underground construction, but Hamas had created something much more elaborate. There were different types of tunnels depending on the purpose. Some were called "administrative shafts"—narrow tunnels built with a combination of wood, concrete, and metal to connect buildings. Terrorists used them to move safely from one place to another without detection.

"Logistic shafts" connected buildings or military sites, and were used to transport weapons, ammunition, food, water, and other equipment.

There were also different kinds of "attack tunnels." Some featured hydraulic devices capable of lifting multi-barreled rocket launchers. Others let terrorists exit via a ladder, retrieve an anti-tank missile, and launch it at IDF soldiers. Terrorists could also use them to gather intelligence by peeking out from the shaft or receiving updates via radio or using agreed-upon code words on mobile devices.

Some attack tunnels opened by moving a round metal plate sideways on a pivot. A terrorist could then reach through the opening and attach an explosive device to a passing tank or APC using a magnet.

Tunnels known as "classic shafts" had no exit and were more like a traditional trench except underground. Terrorists waited inside, sometimes for days, until IDF forces arrived and then attacked them.

While the distinction between the different types of tunnels was helpful for IDF troops, the reality on the ground was challenging. The "classic shafts" were primarily used by Hamas in the initial stages of the IDF ground offensive as part of an attempt to prevent the IDF from advancing toward city centers. But once the IDF made it through that line of defense, Hamas fighters went mostly underground, occasionally launching ambushes against maneuvering or stationary Israeli forces.

During one risky operation in Gaza, the IDF uncovered a group of tunnels that stretched on for miles. In the first maneuver of its kind, elite

IDF troops, along with Shin Bet fighters, advanced dozens of meters underground in a narrow tunnel more than six feet high.

The initial advance in the tunnel was slow. Every few yards, the troops encountered thick steel blast doors locked with handles reminiscent of huge bank vaults. The forces had to carefully scan the area up to the steel door and beyond it before opening, fearing terrorists or explosive booby traps.

After dismantling numerous doors, the fighters realized that they could open some with a special twist of the handle, whereas others had to be forced out of the wall from the frame since they were locked on the other side.

As they approached one door, the soldiers detected armed Hamas men just on the other side, sitting and waiting to attack once they flung the door open.

The steel blast doors were an indication of the high value of the tunnel and what it contained—what some in the IDF referred to as "vital organs." Each door was built to conceal a critical asset or a senior official fleeing for his life.

"Whenever you saw a large number of terrorists around you—in buildings and open areas—with observers who did everything they could to stop you from advancing, you knew—even before descending into the tunnel—that there must be a significant Hamas asset nearby," explained a senior officer from the Southern Command who descended into the Hamas subterranean network on a number of occasions. "This made it even clearer and sharper that we were heading in the right direction to find what we wanted."

The firefights inside the tunnels were unlike anything the IDF had encountered in the past. Soldiers had to insert earplugs to protect against the amplified explosions and ballistic discharges. In addition, the muzzle flashes of rifles and pistols were more intense underground, creating a sensation similar to deep-sea diving, where silence prevails, and communication is limited to glances between one soldier and another. The lead warrior, equipped with a gun fitted with a silencer, had to remain exceptionally calm and sharp, using night vision goggles to safely navigate the dark labyrinth.

The fighters mentioned hearing their own heartbeats due to their high concentration. In some sections of the tunnels, they encountered weak

lighting, forcing them to quickly adapt from night vision to artificial light. Every fraction of a second was critical when facing Hamas Nukhba fighters specially trained and accustomed to tunnel warfare. The fighting could end in a terrorist's escape, a surrender, or a battle. Analysis of some of the skirmishes revealed that if the asset in the tunnel was considered valuable, then the terrorists fought fiercely. If the tunnel did not hold an asset, then the Hamas fighters would try to escape or simply surrender.

Back at IDF headquarters in Tel Aviv, generals could sit and watch video from elite soldiers' head cameras, showing them engaging in firefights with terrorists fifty yards underground or discovering a treasure trove of intelligence.

Months into the fighting, Yaron Finkelman, head of the IDF's Southern Command, decided to see what was happening underground and traversed one of Hamas's long tunnels from the heart of Gaza City to the border. Armed with a sidearm and a commando knife tucked into the front pocket of his ceramic vest, Finkelman saw firsthand the different types of tunnels. The Engineering Corps officers showed him some examples of the sophistication—trap doors under sinks inside tunnels leading to other tunnels, and pneumatic floors in the homes of senior Hamas operatives that —with the press of a foot—led to stairs or an elevator descending dozens of meters. One such tunnel was found in one of Sinwar's secret apartments in Gaza City.

Finkelman concluded from the experience that only fanatics obsessed by hate could dig such a complex underground network.

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Months of fighting taught the IDF how to quickly identify which tunnels were for regular Hamas fighters and which were for leaders. If a tunnel was tiled and contained showers, toilets, meeting rooms with television screens, and bedrooms, like the ones under al-Shifa Hospital in northern Gaza, it was intended for leadership. These tunnels were tall enough that you could walk upright through them. If the ceiling was low, the tunnel was for regular fighters. Some tunnels were fitted with narrow jail cells, cages that were used to hold the hostages. A stench from overcrowding and lack of basic services pervaded these tunnels.

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As the soldiers were discovering the Hamas tunnels, it became clear to IDF leadership that they had to be destroyed.

While the IDF had known about the existence of the tunnels deep in Palestinian territory, it took being there on the ground and exploring them to reveal the extent Hamas had integrated the tunnels into its combat strategy against the Israeli military. It now had to develop new tools and train professional forces for industrial-scale tunnel destruction.

The task of mapping and destroying the tunnels fell to the chief engineering officer in the Southern Command, a young colonel by the name of Avshalom Dadon. Born in Yeruham in the Negev, Dadon began his career as a regular soldier in the Engineering Corps battalions, eventually climbing the ranks until becoming the chief engineering officer for the IDF's 91st Division in the Galilee. There he oversaw the discovery and destruction of the Hezbollah tunnel network in 2018.

As one of the foremost experts on tunnels in the IDF, Dadon's brain holds an encyclopedic archive of tunnel and shaft designs. With just a glance at infrastructure, he can determine when it was built, for whom, and sometimes, by examining the cables or the lunch boxes left at the site, when the terrorists were last there.

Dadon toured most of the tunnels in Gaza. Sometimes, he examined the openings to try to figure out why they would build a shaft in a specific area. Other times, he descended dozens of yards or traversed the tunnels from one end to the other.

In his small office at the Southern Command base in Beersheba, Dadon shared his experiences with the IDF top command, comparing what he went through in the tunnels to the video game *Prince of Persia*, which first came out in the late 1980s and gave players the chance to navigate a maze filled with guards and traps.

As the war progressed, intelligence on tunnel locations, routes, and their intended purposes accumulated. Officials from the Ministry of Defense, Shin Bet, the IDF, and other branches collaborated to provide operational insights to aid soldiers in combat. Using artificial intelligence, they created a digital map that included all tunnel information at their disposal. Dadon oversaw the creation of the map, and it proved invaluable.

It helped locate additional shafts and tunnels, facilitated ground operations that avoided areas with tunnels, and helped improve the ability to destroy them. The artificial intelligence also helped to identify strategic tunnels used to protect valuable assets.

While the IDF field units adapted to this new form of warfare, the sheer number of tunnels they discovered took longer than expected to clear, map out, and then destroy. They could not, for example, simply destroy tunnel openings since most tunnels had multiple openings. They could not bomb entire tunnels either, since the tunnels almost always ran under buildings like schools and hospitals. The IDF first had to ensure that all buildings along a route were cleared of civilians—as much as possible—before destroying the tunnel.

The slow process drew sharp criticism from the public—soldiers were sometimes killed or injured by a booby-trapped tunnel opening. It took time, but Dadon and his team eventually created a clearer and faster method for destroying the tunnels.

“In the operation to destroy the Hezbollah tunnels in the north, I had a year to plan and succeeded in destroying all of the tunnels within forty-two days,” Dadon recalled. “During the war in Gaza, we arrived at an average tunnel and carried out the mapping and destruction phase in about a week, with all the safety precautions put in place by the head of the Southern Command. It is impossible to reach special tunnels without intelligence. But for the most part, the intelligence does not tell you how many steel doors are in each tunnel, whether the depth of the tunnel varies from section to section, how many terrorists are inside, when the tunnel turns left, why it branches, and why it descends in the middle by another ten yards.”

The actual destruction of the tunnels was not simple. The IDF utilized three key methods. The most common one involved placing mines and charges at the entrance of tunnels. A second involved drilling holes in the tunnel walls, placing sticks of dynamite or other explosives inside, and then detonating them in a controlled explosion.

The third key method was pouring a liquid explosive into a tunnel and activating it using a detonating cord, causing a powerful explosion. In many cases, emulsion explosives are favored because the liquid is stable and safe to handle in its initial state, making it suitable for controlled demolition operations.

The IDF explored alternative methods, one of which involved a high-pressure water compression system designed to flood Hamas tunnels with seawater drawn from the nearby Mediterranean. The goal was to crush the tunnels from within using the sheer force of the water pressure. The method ultimately proved ineffective in bringing down the subterranean network.

One of the largest tunnels, discovered two months into the war near the Erez crossing in the northern Gaza Strip, where thousands of Palestinians used to cross daily into Israel for work or medical treatment, was nicknamed “the Monster.” Dug just a few hundred yards from the crossing, the tunnel was about two miles long, seventy yards deep, and up to six yards at its widest, big enough for a jeep to pass through. Hamas had dug it right under the nose of Israeli intelligence.

The walls of the tunnel—which extended all the way to Gaza City—bore soot marks from the vehicles that drove inside it. The journey was long and exhausting for the IDF soldiers; it was often difficult to breathe due to the stench of sewage water that had seeped inside. Reinforced with concrete and steel beams, the tunnel had shafts in the floor that extended to a sprawling network of offshoots and other levels. The tunnel was built not just for attacks but also for kidnapping soldiers and civilians, giving the terrorists the ability to quickly retreat back into Gaza, safe from IDF tanks and aircraft.

When asked how the IDF could have been unaware of such a massive tunnel near the Erez crossing, a senior officer admitted that while they vaguely knew of the tunnel’s existence, they had no idea of its scale—and yes, this had been a severe intelligence oversight. A video found on a senior Hamas official’s laptop showed Mohammed Sinwar, brother of Yahya Sinwar and his eventual successor as the leader of Hamas in Gaza, driving a jeep through the tunnel.

That such a tunnel went undetected for so long illustrates the Israeli disaster, and it again begs the most basic of questions—how did Hamas become like this, and how did Israel miss what was happening right under its nose?

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4

The Birth of Hamas

Back on October 7, as Hamas terrorists unleashed murder and chaos in Israel, over a thousand miles away in a lavish wood-paneled office in Doha, Qatar, a group of Hamas leaders, dressed in finely tailored suits and wearing expensive watches, were erupting in jubilation. Al Jazeera's live feed blared from a wall-mounted TV about the Hamas invasion in southern Israel.

The Hamas leaders shed their shoes and formed a reverent line on the pristine beige carpet. Heads bowed, bodies swaying, they chanted in unison, "Allahu Akbar!"

It was a celebratory prayer and fervent declaration of victory to praise the fighters who were going house to house in Israeli kibbutzim and through the nearby fields raping women, murdering entire families, and taking 251 people hostage back into the Gaza Strip.

At the front of the worshipers was Ismail Haniyeh, the former Hamas leader in Gaza turned foreign political leader. Behind him was Mousa Abu Marzook, his deputy, as well as Saleh al-Arouri, a top Hamas military commander. Al-Arouri would be killed two months later in a targeted Israeli strike in Beirut, while Hanieyh would be assassinated in July 2024 while sleeping in an Iranian military guesthouse in Tehran.

The Hamas leaders in Doha later admitted to being surprised by the attack. They claimed to have known that the terrorist group in Gaza was planning such an assault on Israel but were not privy to the operational details of exactly when and how. While most of them had been born and

raised in Gaza, they had relocated over the years and were now mostly based in Qatar, the gas-rich state where many of them lived with the support of the emir in the lap of luxury while raising funds and terrorist support for the fighters back in Gaza.

"Enough is enough," Haniyeh said that day. "The cycle of intifadas and revolutions in the battle to liberate our Palestinian land and our prisoners languishing in occupation prisons must be completed."

It was quite the sight. These men, long-wanted arch terrorists and some even targeted in the past by Israeli bombs, looked like businessmen or politicians.

It would have been like Americans seeing Osama bin Laden after 9/11 in an office boardroom as opposed to a cave somewhere on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and wearing an Armani double-breasted jacket instead of military fatigues and a tightly wrapped white turban.

It illustrated something about Hamas. Yes, it's a terrorist organization of the most ruthless and murderous kind, but its top members are also politically savvy, wealthy, and welcome in countries like Qatar.

Another interesting aspect of Hamas, which many Israelis were surprised to learn, came out weeks into the IDF ground offensive in Gaza. The military began to sift through the troves of documents recovered from homes and offices throughout the Gaza Strip. Many outlined tactical plans, whereas others were instructional manuals for how to assemble rockets or roadside bombs. But other documents showed something that took Israeli intelligence aback: Hamas had kept its finger on the pulse of Israeli society in the run-up to the war.

One document, believed to have been handwritten by a top Hamas commander, outlined a plan of psychological warfare that would undermine Israeli resilience and turn the nation against its leadership. Found in a tunnel compound where Hamas's leaders had clearly spent time, the document stressed the importance of publishing photos and videos of the hostages that Hamas abducted on October 7 as a way to politically weaken Netanyahu and put pressure on the Israeli government to agree to a ceasefire and stop its offensive. The note, for example, specifically called for placing pressure on Yoav Gallant, the defense minister, who had a tense relationship with the prime minister throughout the war.

“They knew what they were doing and how to weaken and undermine us,” one official explained.

Hamas proved that it had a sophisticated understanding of the mood inside Israel, what it needed to do to deliver a gut punch to the Israelis, and what buttons it needed to press to set off protests against the government.

It should not have been a surprise. Many Hamas terrorists have spent significant time in Israeli prisons. They know Israelis, their customs, temperament, and vulnerabilities.

Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader who planned and orchestrated the October 7 massacre, learned to speak fluent Hebrew during a twenty-two-year stint in Israeli prison for the murder of four alleged informants. He spent his time in jail studying the country, reading books by former Israeli prime ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin and about the Zionist-revisionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky.

A few days after October 7, he came to one of the tunnels and met with the Israeli hostages. “I am Yahya Sinwar. You are protected here. Nothing will happen to you,” he told them in flawless Hebrew.

Yocheved Lifshitz, an eighty-five-year-old hostage who was abducted with her husband from the kibbutz of Nir Oz, snapped back at the Hamas leader. As reported in *The Guardian* on November 29, 2023, “How are you not ashamed of yourself to do this to people who for years have supported peace and coexistence?” she asked him. Sinwar did not respond.

The visit was likely one of the pinnacles of Sinwar’s career in terrorism. The man whom Israel had locked up for more than two decades was now holding 251 hostages.

Born in 1962 in the Khan Younis refugee camp in southern Gaza, Sinwar’s family arrived in Gaza in 1948 after the War of Independence displaced them from a village near the modern Israeli city of Ashkelon. He was one of the founding members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s student cell and was repeatedly elected to its leadership.

He popped up on Israel’s radar in the mid-1980s as a shadowy character who was close to the wheelchair-bound Hamas founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Yassin appointed his disciple head of the Majd, Hamas’s counterintelligence branch. Sinwar’s main mission was to root out and eliminate Palestinians collaborating with Israeli intelligence or embracing Western ways. While he was sent to jail in 1989 for murder,

he told Israeli prison officials that he actually had killed twelve informants instead of the four he was charged with killing.

“He was known for his brutality,” explained retired colonel David Hacham, the former IDF Arab affairs adviser who served almost twenty years in the Gaza Strip. “Collaborators received the worst from him—like having boiling oil poured on their heads.”

At the time of his arrest, Sinwar was a twenty-five-year-old bachelor still living at home in Building 172 in the 34th quarter of Khan Younis. It was a complex built and managed by the United Nations and was full of his relatives—grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Israel apprehended him in Gaza on suspicion that he was involved in violence against Gazan liberals and progressives, carrying out, for example, a series of arson attacks against video rental stores. While he was awaiting trial for arson, officials received intelligence about his involvement in the murder of suspected collaborators.

During its investigation, Shin Bet discovered that at some point during his university years, Sinwar was recruited by followers of Abdullah Azzam—one of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders and the founder of al-Qaeda. Azzam’s extremist ideology profoundly influenced Sinwar. Every political and military action he would undertake would be infused with religious justification, attributing his murderous policies to divine will.

Sinwar told his interrogators about his first steps in Hamas back in 1985, when he had met Yassin and complained to him about the Western influence that was spreading throughout Gaza. “We decided to recruit a few people who would gather information about anything that was happening that was against Islam,” he reportedly said.

The team was very discreet, communicating through notes left in designated hiding places on the Islamic University campus in Gaza City. Sinwar went on to lead Shin Bet interrogators to the burial places of some of the people he murdered. When he finally stood trial, he was sentenced to multiple and consecutive life terms in prison.

The prison sentence didn’t break his spirit. Sinwar believed that one day he would be released, would return to Gaza, and would continue fighting the Zionists.

Sinwar told Micha Koubi, a Shin Bet agent who interrogated him after his arrest, about one punishment he gave to the brother of a suspected

informer. He handed the brother a shovel and made him bury the suspected collaborator alive. “He made the brother pour and pour and pour. That’s Yahya Sinwar,” said Koubi. He killed another informant by strangling him with his keffiyeh, the traditional Palestinian scarf.

“When I asked him why he was not married, he told me that he was married to Hamas,” said Koubi.

During his long sentence, Sinwar rose to prominence behind the prison walls, becoming the leader of Hamas in Israeli jails. While terrorists from different factions are imprisoned in Israel, for the most part they are kept separate—Hamas members in one wing, Islamic Jihad in another wing, and members of groups with smaller membership, like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, in a third. Hamas is obviously the largest organization, and with that comes influence over what the prisoners do, how they conduct themselves in jail, and whether they listen to their Israeli guards or not.

Being behind bars is one of the fastest ways to earn stripes on the Palestinian street, mostly due to the way prisoners are viewed—as martyrs or freedom fighters who have actively resisted the so-called Israeli occupation and are sacrificing and paying a personal price on behalf of the rest of the Palestinian people. Within the prison walls, Sinwar led internal investigations for Hamas, rooting out prisoners collaborating with Israeli intelligence. This role enabled him to climb to the top of the leadership hierarchy within the prison.

As such, Sinwar gained experience in negotiations with Israeli authorities—for example, during hunger strikes—acquiring insight into how his enemy thought and operated. A fellow inmate recalled how Sinwar often spoke about his ancestral home in Ashkelon and the need to defeat Israel so his family could one day return there.

During this time—through lawyers, hidden notes, and smuggled cell phones—Sinwar stayed in touch with Hamas operatives in the Gaza Strip. Prison authorities and Shin Bet knew about such activity, but, for the most part, they let it slide, fearing that a crackdown would spark a prison riot.

In 2006, prison authorities allowed Sinwar to give a rare interview on Israeli television from his jail cell. His remarks back then were almost prophetic when watching them again in 2024 as Israel—via Qatari and

Egyptian mediation—was trying to reach a ceasefire deal with Hamas to release the hostages still being held in Gaza.

"We are stubborn, and like we made Israel miserable during the years of resistance, we will make their lives miserable during the dialogue over a ceasefire," he said at the time.

In 2004, a routine medical checkup discovered a tumor growing in Sinwar's head. He was treated in an Israeli hospital where the tumor was removed, and his life was saved. In a tragic twist of fate, Tamir Adar, the nephew of Dr. Yuval Bitton, the prison doctor who had initially treated Sinwar, was killed on October 7, and his body was abducted by Hamas.

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Sinwar, and the story of his rise to prominence, is woven into the story of Hamas—how it began, how it grew in popularity and strength, and how it climbed to power in the Gaza Strip.

Officially, Hamas came into existence on December 14, 1987, a Monday. Colonel David Hacham was sitting in his office in Gaza City when he heard a knock on the door. A member of his Arab Department walked in with a pamphlet that had just hit the streets of Gaza, announcing the establishment of a new Palestinian organization with an unheard-of acronym: Hamas, Arabic for the Islamic Resistance Movement.

A fluent Arabic speaker and intelligence officer, Hacham had arrived in Gaza a year earlier and settled into a suite of offices in downtown Gaza City. Those were the days when Israel wasn't just present in Gaza—it controlled the place, everything from the hospitals to the schools and sanitation. Hacham's job was to be Israel's eyes and ears on the ground. To study the civilian population, analyze trends, decipher people's everyday frustrations, and look for ways to advance a diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

That entire year, Hacham had a feeling that something bad was coming. In August, an IDF officer was killed in Gaza, and then in October, a group of Islamic Jihad terrorists escaped from an Israeli prison by sawing off the bars of their cell. They later ambushed an IDF patrol in the Gaza neighborhood of Shuja'iyya.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, when Israelis talked about the Palestinian enemy, there was a clear address—the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Yasser Arafat, the famous Palestinian revolutionary known for his army fatigues and crisp keffiyeh. Islamists were believed to mostly want to chant and study the Quran, not engage in terrorist activity. This is why, when Ahmed Yassin asked to register a new Islamic organization in Gaza in 1973, the Israeli military administration there gave him approval and registered the group as a recognized charity. Its name was Mujama al-Islamiya.

When it started, Mujama's focus was on welfare—schools, medical clinics, youth clubs, and, of course, mosques. It was in these mosques that Yassin, who was a teacher at an Israeli-funded school, meaning that his salary was paid indirectly from Israel, recruited his finest disciples, people like Sinwar.

Yassin had gleaned the inspiration for Mujama from his years of study and alignment with the Muslim Brotherhood, a group founded in Egypt in the 1920s that has yielded some of the worst terrorist groups in the one hundred years since. Its slogan of "Islam is the solution and the Quran is our constitution" has served as the philosophical foundation for radical Islamists from the sandy hills of Algeria to the bustling markets of Malaysia.

Mujama began with a seemingly benign mission: to draw the Palestinian people closer to Islam and resist the creeping influence of secular Western culture. At first glance, the association appeared to be nothing more than a charitable entity, distributing food, medicine, and education to the needy, especially in the sprawling refugee camps of Gaza.

Israeli intelligence, including Shin Bet agents and the IDF officers who patrolled Gaza's narrow streets, initially regarded Yassin's group, which directed wayward youth into educational activities at mosques and community centers, as a positive influence. But in the shadows, Yassin's organization was laying the groundwork for a deadly insurgency. They were not just aiding the poor; they were actively opposing the PLO, whom they saw as Muslims who had lost their way, and, more dangerously, they were plotting against the State of Israel itself.

The first signs of this darker agenda took time to emerge. Rumors started circulating about Mujama members who were violently disciplining

Palestinians who dared to stray from a strict religious lifestyle and were adopting so-called Western habits.

Hacham met regularly with the Mujama activists, most of the time alone in his Gaza office. Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader who led the October 7 prayer in Qatar, was a regular visitor. So was Sheikh Yassin. Ahmed Bahar, a senior member of the Hamas legislative council who was killed in an Israeli airstrike during the 2024 war, received his approval to travel to Sudan to finish his doctorate from Hacham. He knew them all.

“In all my meetings with the Mujama activists, it was impossible not to feel the hatred for us,” he recalled years later. “They hated us in their eyes. Every meeting I would feel the deep hatred. I could feel that they were shooting arrows of fire at me.”

The meetings were opportunities for Hacham to get a read on the thinking among the Mujama leaders. One time, Hacham brought Haim Gouri, a celebrated Israeli poet, Palmach fighter, and voice of the national conscience, to Gaza to meet Yassin. The meeting took place in Hacham’s office. Gouri asked Yassin how he viewed the conflict with Israel.

“Look,” Yassin responded, “throughout history, there have been many empires and kingdoms—the Romans, the Persians, the British, and the Ottoman Turks—but where are they all today?” It is only a matter of time, he continued, before Israel meets a similar demise.

Other meetings would take place at Yassin’s mosque in southern Gaza, and the IDF even arranged for the sickly sheikh to be taken to Israel for medical treatment when necessary.

The IDF clearly misread what was happening in Gaza when they decided in 1978 to grant approval for the establishment of the Islamic University of Gaza, the first institute of higher education in the Strip. Until then, if a Gazan wanted a university degree, he or she had to travel abroad, mainly to Egypt. While some members of Fatah—the larger Palestinian nationalistic movement founded by Arafat—also studied at the Islamic University, Israel watched as the teaching positions were filled by members of Mujama and even the Muslim Brotherhood. For Hamas, it became the home for almost all of its top operatives. Two doctors who would later become deputies to Yassin established a nursing faculty at the university. Haniyeh was head of the university’s student council and later worked in the university’s marketing and public relations department.

Sinwar studied there, as did Mohammed Deif, the elusive Hamas military commander who survived a number of Israeli assassination attempts over the years and helped plan the October 7 attacks. His real name was Mohammed Diab al-Masri, but he changed it to the nom de guerre he gained from the Arabic word “guest,” a reference to his habit of constantly moving the location of where he would sleep to avoid Israel’s watchful eye.

Israel understood that something was happening at the university but had trouble translating it into actionable intelligence. In hindsight, officials admitted that the university had become a hotbed for Islamic extremism and that it might have been a mistake to allow it to become so closely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In the early 1980s, IDF soldiers would trail some of the university’s top officials and even raided its offices, mostly in the middle of the night. More than once, the soldiers and Shin Bet agents found notebooks, folders, and pamphlets full of anti-Israel rhetoric, including Arabic copies of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as well as different versions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

In 1984, the IDF received a tip from Fatah members that Yassin’s Islamist followers were collecting arms. Israeli soldiers raided the mosque and found a cache of weapons. While Yassin was sent to prison, he was released after just a year, telling his interrogators that the weapons were intended for use against Mujama’s rival Fatah, not Israel.

Looking back today, Hacham says that at the time the existence of Mujama was useful for Israel in Gaza. The Islamists clashed with PLO supporters over local power, and when the Arabs fought among themselves it meant that they were preoccupied and could not unite to fight Israel. Yassin was trying hard to gain more influence, taking over professional Gazan unions of doctors, lawyers, and engineers and looking to outmaneuver his rivals. In the end, Israel was mostly concerned with Arafat and his followers, and Yassin and Mujama were seen as something of a counterweight.

While the IDF and Shin Bet officers who served in Gaza at the time said that they never received an order to deliberately strengthen Mujama at the expense of the PLO, the idea was always in the air. “We allowed both forces to operate in the field at the same time,” one former official

explained. “They were against one another, and Israel lived with both of them and did not try to change the reality.”

No one at the time thought about the long-term consequences.

Instead, many Israelis lived under the illusion that the people of Gaza wanted Israel to continue its military rule over the territory despite some talks—mostly by the Palestinian secularists from Fatah—about statehood and independence. Benjamin Netanyahu, during his term as Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations—a role that would propel him into a life of politics—paid a rare informal visit to Gaza in mid-1986. As Israel’s envoy to the UN, he was fighting daily against Arab and European aspirations for Palestinian independence, and he wanted to see for himself what life was like on Gaza’s streets as Palestinian nationalism was brewing.

Netanyahu visited the IDF’s Gaza Brigade headquarters in the building that had previously served as the parliament during the Egyptian rule over Gaza, and then he went to “Palestine Square” in downtown Gaza City, which in just a few years would be the scene of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians gathering to greet Yasser Arafat upon his arrival in Gaza under the Oslo Accords that Netanyahu would later work to undermine.

Accompanied by a small group of IDF officers, Netanyahu then went to the local open market and chatted and joked with some of the shoppers. IDF officers who accompanied him left with the impression that there was nothing wrong with the situation in Gaza.

But there was a lot wrong. Although Israel didn’t know yet, a dramatic change was taking place in Gaza. Yassin and his Islamist followers at Mujama had morphed from their dawa (charity) work to jihad and terrorism and were just waiting for the opportune moment to come out from the shadows. That came in early December 1987, when an Israeli truck collided with a Palestinian car near the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip.

Israeli authorities claimed that the crash was an accident, but four Palestinians had been killed, and many Gazans saw the incident as intentional retaliation for the killing of a Jew who had been shopping in Gaza several days earlier. Later that day, during the funerals, riots broke out throughout the Gaza Strip. A spark had been lit, and the “First Intifada”—the Palestinian uprising—had erupted. A few days later, Gaza City was full

of posters signed by a new group calling for more protests and armed resistance against Israel. The group called itself Hamas.

At first, Israel did not know what Hamas was or that it was connected to Mujama, the same Islamic group to which the military government had given a stamp of approval a decade earlier.

But Israeli intelligence quickly realized that the people who were fighting in the name of Hamas were past members of Mujama. This new entity was no longer just a charity; it was a hydra, with a civil aid arm, a political arm, and a secret military arm, the latter led by the ruthless Salah Shehada. It was the dawn of Hamas's military buildup.

What became clear was that Mujama—the charitable organization—was just a cover for the resistance group that was based on a radical religious and anti-Western ideology. It used religious institutions to recruit people and then selected the best to become military operatives and join what would become known as the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, named after the sheikh and symbol of Palestinian resistance who fought British forces in 1935.

Hamas even established a protocol that ensured a *badil*—Arabic for "replacement"—who would be ready to step in for any member arrested or killed, guaranteeing the movement's relentless advance.

For most of the first year of the intifada, though, things still seemed containable. Hamas became involved in large public disturbances, but they were not yet engaging openly in an armed struggle against Israel. Some intelligence and IDF officials predicted that the riots would pass, but they didn't. It was a new tide of unrest, one that kept gaining momentum as the violence continued.

The turn to jihad—or armed resistance—did not take long.

In 1989, two Hamas terrorists, disguised as religious Jews and sent by Yassin, kidnapped IDF sergeant Avi Sasportas and brutally murdered him. A few months later, Hamas terrorists abducted IDF corporal Ilan Saadon. Although he fought back, the abductors shot him and dumped his body at a scrap metal junkyard.

The arrest of Salah Shehada led to the unraveling of a vast network, ominously nicknamed "the European Championship" by Shin Bet. The investigation soon uncovered another Hamas unit called "Squad 101," which carried out deadly terrorist attacks.

Israel cracked down, and Shin Bet and the IDF arrested over five hundred Hamas activists, including Yassin and Sinwar. Other Hamas members managed to flee to Jordan and Lebanon. But the more information Israel uncovered, the clearer the intelligence gap. Hamas was no ordinary adversary, and right under Israel's nose a new movement had been established with a singular goal: the elimination of the State of Israel.

And while Yassin would end up sitting in jail for about eight years and would be killed in an Israeli airstrike in 2003, he told his followers that he was blessed with a God-given prophesy according to which Islam was in the midst of a two-stage revolutionary process. The first forty years since the establishment of the State of Israel—an event that Palestinians call the *Nakba* ("catastrophe" in Arabic)—was referred to as the "Generation of Defeat" for those who lost to Israel. The next forty years, from 1988 to 2028, he explained, would see the defeat of Israel.

In May 1988, Israel got its hands on the first draft of the Hamas charter that Yassin had secretly approved. It was a small, green-covered pamphlet provided to the Arab Affairs Department stationed in Gaza by a Palestinian agent the IDF occasionally used for covert missions. The charter had been written by a group of clerics aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, went through some edits by Yassin, was approved, printed in a small edition, and distributed to the top Hamas operatives.

Out of the document's dozens of clauses, main themes emerged: the conflict with Israel is religious and political; all of Palestine is Muslim land, and no one has the right to give it up; the destruction of Israel is essential for the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of a state based on Islamic law (Sharia); and jihad (a holy war) is the way to attain this objective.

Unlike the PLO charter, which calls for armed resistance but is more of a political document, the Hamas charter is akin to a religious document. There is no hierarchy or approval process, unlike the PLO charter, that can be amended by a majority of two-thirds of the organization's National Congress. Hamas's document is rife with anti-Semitism; it talks in universal terms about the battle for Muslim hearts and minds, or as the charter calls it, "the spread of Islamic consciousness" among Palestinians, general Arab Muslims, and non-Arab Muslims.

The Jews are presented as worthy of only humiliation and misery. That is because, according to the charter, they angered Allah, rejected the Quran, and killed the prophets (the relevant Quran verse from Surah Aal-‘Imran is quoted at the beginning of the charter). The document includes anti-Semitic myths taken from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, including Jewish control of the media and responsibility for the French and Russian Revolutions as well as all world wars: “No war takes place anywhere without the Jews being behind it,” Article 22 states.

In other words, this was about war and the elimination of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. In the charter there is no room for political or diplomatic pragmatism. Hamas is bent on Israel’s destruction. Recognizing Israel, or engaging in political negotiations with it, is completely off the table.

What Yassin was doing was obvious—not only was he declaring jihad and an unrelenting holy war against Israel, but he was also openly challenging the PLO and its primary movement, Fatah, which had taken a more nationalistic and political approach to its fight.

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As Hamas grew, it established three primary interrelated wings. The public face was the dawa, the social and welfare institutions that Yassin founded under the umbrella of Mujama back in the 1970s. The second wing was the terrorist army, which, in the first years, was mostly busy fighting Fatah for dominance over the Gaza Strip while hunting and executing suspected collaborators, purchasing weapons, and carrying out small-scale terrorist attacks against Israel. Then there was the so-called foreign wing of Hamas, which on October 7 was based in Qatar.

In a sign of just how much the West misread Hamas in the beginning, the foreign branch was first based in the United States and was led there by Mousa Abu Marzook, a Palestinian who lived in America for fourteen years, during which time he obtained a green card and earned a doctorate in industrial engineering from Louisiana Tech University. On the side, Abu Marzook set up Hamas’s overseas fundraising arm and was able to operate almost freely in the United States until 1995, when he was arrested at New York’s JFK Airport after returning from a trip overseas.

And here the fiasco began. The Americans said they would begin extradition proceedings to Israel due to Abu Marzook's support of terrorism and based on evidence that seemed to link him to "ten specific, grave incidents of terrorism in and around Israel before his arrival in the United States."

Back in Israel, Yitzhak Rabin's government determined that it had enough evidence with which to convict Abu Marzook in an Israeli court, and on July 30, 1995, an official extradition request was submitted. Senior government officials explained that not doing so would encourage terrorism, making it seem as if attacks against Israel did not come with a price.

The hearings in the United States took almost a year, but on May 9, 1996, US District Judge Kevin Duffy ruled to extradite Abu Marzook to Israel, concluding that there was probable cause that the Hamas leader had been involved in 10 Hamas attacks between 1990 to 1994 that killed a total of 47 people and wounded 148. The evidence was based on a thick dossier sent by Israel as well as on Abu Marzook's public claim that he was responsible for a shooting attack that killed two Israelis in downtown Jerusalem in 1994.

But a few weeks later, a new Israeli government was being formed by Benjamin Netanyahu. He decided to reopen the extradition request and asked diplomatic and security officials for new opinions on the matter.

It was a strange decision by the relatively new prime minister. Netanyahu had made a name for himself as being tough on terror, and he even wrote books that were meant to teach the world how to defeat terrorism. Yet now he was suddenly reevaluating a request submitted to the Americans to hand over a Palestinian terrorist so he could stand trial for his crimes in Israel, where he had committed them. This adjustment in course was explained by government sources at the time as stemming from a concern that a trial would lead to a new wave of terror attacks against Israel. Netanyahu, who was elected on the claim that he could restore security to Israel, apparently wanted to buy as much quiet as possible, even if it meant letting one of the top Hamas leaders in the world get away.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave some insight into the decision, which she explained as Israel having withdrawn its "request at this time as an effort to foster an atmosphere in which renewal of Palestinian

efforts against terrorism can be obtained and the negotiating process placed back on track."

America held on to Abu Marzook for a bit longer, but without an extradition request from Israel, it no longer had grounds to keep him in jail. He agreed to relinquish his permanent residence status and to not contest the terrorism accusations that had prompted his initial detention. In exchange, the United States released him from jail and allowed him to travel to Jordan, and from there he continued to climb the Hamas ranks.

The story of Abu Marzook underscores the complex dynamics in Israel's battle against Hamas: progress often feels like two steps forward and then another step back.

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While Hamas turned to terror and jihad in the late 1980s with the eruption of the intifada, it still took some time for it to establish a comprehensive terrorist operation and morph into the murderous group that would instill fear in Israelis and others around the world.

By 1991, Hamas's transformation was almost complete. What began as an organization throwing Molotov cocktails and carrying out drive-by shootings of IDF soldiers had evolved into a fully armed military force. Hamas fighters were now receiving assault rifles and grenades smuggled from Egypt, as well as explosive devices designed to kill Israeli soldiers and civilians alike.

The most notorious Hamas commanders at the time were Emad Aqel, who would be killed in an undercover IDF operation in the heart of Gaza City in November 1993, and Mohammed Deif, who would go on to become a legend, evading multiple assassination attempts until he was finally killed in an Israeli airstrike in July 2024. Shin Bet investigations revealed that Deif was the one who pushed Hamas leadership to establish a formidable military and not to be satisfied with small terrorist cells. The IDF would meet this military force in Gaza in 2023—a full-fledged Hamas army with an arsenal of tens of thousands of rockets.

April 16, 1993, was a turning point that should have awoken Israel. A Hamas bombmaker rigged a Volkswagen Transporter van with a couple of

gas tanks and explosives removed from grenades. The detonator was connected to the driver controls.

The plan was to park the van in the Jordan Valley next to an Israeli bus and detonate it. The bomber did exactly that, but the buses he parked next to were mostly empty, and the explosion killed only two people. A year later, Hamas would get the plan right: a suicide bomber detonated another van next to a bus in the northern city of Afula, killing eight students whose school day had just ended.

Hamas was on the warpath, and while Sinwar still sat in prison, the world, and particularly the Middle East, was changing. In 1993, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat signed the Oslo Accords at the White House under the watchful eye of President Bill Clinton, and Israel recognized the PLO, allowing it to morph into the Palestinian Authority (PA), a new governing entity that was supposed to pave the way toward independent statehood in the West Bank and Gaza.

Hamas refused to accept any move toward normalization with Israel. In opposition to any recognition of the Jewish state, as dictated in its charter, it increased the pace of its suicide bombings, targeting buses and restaurants. Five people were killed at a bus station in Hadera, twenty-two on a bus in central Tel Aviv, and three at an IDF checkpoint in the Gaza Strip when a Palestinian on a bicycle blew himself up. Hamas had turned into a lethal terrorist group responsible for countless suicide bombing attacks and the murder of scores of Israelis.

Killing Israelis was not enough. Hamas also wanted to take revenge on the Fatah members who had signed the Oslo Accords. The organization sent emissaries to Sheikh Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most influential Muslim scholars at the time, asking for a religious ruling—known as a fatwa—to justify killing Palestinians who supported the accords. When he refused, they turned to Ibrahim al-Makadmeh, a religious zealot and one of the political founders of Hamas, who sanctioned the murder of collaborators.

As the violence escalated, more youth from the refugee camps of Gaza were inspired to join Hamas’s ranks. Raad Saad, a senior Hamas figure who would later be killed by the IAF in June 2024, suggested in a meeting with top commanders in 1994 that Hamas should learn from Hezbollah and develop a rocket capability to bypass Israel’s border defenses. Saad’s plan

led to the development of Hamas's first rockets, called "Qassam," which would make their debut in 2001, marking a new, deadly phase in the conflict.

Israel tried to fight back. Yes, it was facing a steep rise in never-before-seen terrorist attacks inside Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, but it was also, at the same time, trying to finalize a peace agreement with the PA under the framework of the Oslo Accords. It needed to fight back, but not in a way that would undermine the chance for a deal. The solution Israel came up with was targeted and isolated strikes, taking out a terrorist here and another there, but not dealing with the problem at its root.

One perfect example of this methodology was the way Israel targeted one of the founders of Hamas's Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Yahya Ayyash, the group's top bombmaker.

Nicknamed "the Engineer," Ayyash had his hand in almost all of the suicide attacks against Israel. It was Ayyash who rigged the Volkswagen that exploded near the settlement of Beit El in 1993, and it was Ayyash who rigged the Opel that blew up in Afula a year later. In total, Ayyash's attacks killed around eighty Israelis and injured four hundred more.

In mid-1996, Israel received a tip that Ayyash had somehow crossed from the West Bank into Gaza. While it tried, Shin Bet could not locate him, prompting the agency to allow Ayyash's wife to also cross into Gaza in the hope that she would cause him to surface. After a few months, Shin Bet discovered that the wife was pregnant, indicating that the bombmaker was somewhere hiding in the narrow alleyways of Gaza's crowded refugee camps.

After a few weeks, Shin Bet picked up Ayyash's trail and succeeded in infiltrating the terrorist's inner circle. Shin Bet then learned from its informants that Ayyash would talk every Friday by phone with his father, who still lived in the West Bank. Shin Bet came up with a plan to get a bugged cell phone to a house Ayyash occasionally visited and try to listen in on him speaking with his father.

The risks were huge: if one of the agents used to smuggle the phone was discovered or caught, Ayyash would go deeper into hiding. On the other hand, Israel could finally listen to his conversations and gather intelligence on his plots. He was within Israel's reach. They had to get him.

While Shin Bet would have preferred to capture Ayyash and question him, a ground operation was off the table. It would be seen from miles away, and Ayyash would likely escape. There was only one option: they had to kill him. The question was how.

They considered an airstrike but quickly ruled that out—the apartment Ayyash was staying in was in a building with too many civilians. The strike would have disproportionate consequences.

That's when Shin Bet remembered the phone.

If they could get the phone back to Israel, engineers in the intelligence agency could fill it with just enough explosives to kill Ayyash if he was holding the receiver to his ear. That was a lot of "ifs," including the technological hurdle of the phone being an old flip Motorola, and Israel would need to get enough explosives inside while ensuring that the phone could still function.

Some Shin Bet operatives suggested smuggling an explosives-laden fax machine into the apartment. The explosion, the Shin Bet experts said, would only kill people in the room. The problem was that children were often seen in the house, and there would be no way to know if they would be in the room at the same time as Ayyash. The assassination had to be precise.

In the end, Shin Bet smuggled the phone back out of Gaza, brought it to headquarters, and planted about fifty grams of explosives inside—enough to blow up Ayyash's head if the phone was pressed to his ear. A few Fridays later, after the phone had been smuggled back into Gaza, Ayyash's father called. Shin Bet was waiting and listening.

While the detonator could be set off from Shin Bet headquarters, the air force put a plane over Gaza to serve as the transmission relay point.

One Shin Bet operative listened to the call. His job was to identify Ayyash's voice when he came on the line. Another had his finger on the detonator. After a few tense moments, the first operative identified Ayyash and gave the signal.

The second operative pressed the button but nothing happened. He pressed again a little harder, but still nothing happened.

The Shin Bet operative pressed the button six times that Friday, but the bomb did not detonate. The only explanation was a technical malfunction. After a few days, Shin Bet managed to get the phone back to Israel again,

and despite the risk of reopening a booby-trapped cell phone, they did just that and discovered that one of the detonator wires had come loose.

Once the phone was back in its place it was only a matter of time. On January 5, 1996, Ayyash answered a call from his father. When the Shin Bet operative pressed the button this time, the call immediately went silent. At first the operative didn't understand why. Then a colleague reminded him—the phone had just blown up.

Almost thirty years later, Ayyash's assassination is still looked at as one of the more remarkable targeted killings carried out by Israel. And while it was an intelligence and operational success and one of the first examples of how Israel was adapting to the threat of suicide bombers, it was only the tip of the iceberg. As one former senior defense official explained, for every Ayyash who was killed, another ten new terrorists would appear in his place.

Hamas was not going away, and as impressive as Israel's operations were, they would not be enough to stop it.

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Israel continued trying to fight back, launching incursions into Gaza and developing a hit list of terrorists for targeted assassinations. Some of the terrorists were killed by ground forces, but most were eliminated from the air, by fighter jets as well as by then-top-secret attack drones, which Israel had developed and no one in the world knew about yet. In one memorable drone strike, a fighter jet flew overheard right after the killing to make it seem as if it had dropped the bomb.

As it fought Hamas, Israel also, at the same time, came under growing pressure from the United States and Europe to keep an avenue open for negotiations with the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, even if politicians in Israel or the West were skeptical that the talks would succeed. It is because of this need to keep a channel open for negotiations that, no matter the prime minister, the government's policy was almost always the same—attempt to fight Palestinian terrorists in the most targeted way possible, but never go too deep into Palestinian territory or expand their offensive too wide.

For a period of time, this approach seemed to work. In 1995, there were four terrorist bombing attacks; in 1996 there were also four, and from 1997 to 2000 there were four total. Everything changed in 2000 after the failure of the Camp David peace talks, hosted by Bill Clinton, between Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat. The talks aimed to resolve the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including borders, the status of Jerusalem, refugees, and security, but the summit ended after fourteen days without an agreement. Violence broke out almost immediately at a level never seen before in Israel. In what would become known as the Second Intifada, more than one thousand Israelis and two thousand Palestinians would be killed in a period of just five years.

March 2002 was something of a turning point. Known in Israel as "Black March," it brought an unprecedented number of Hamas terrorist attacks. Israel had been battling Palestinian terrorism for eighteen months following the breakdown of peace talks at Camp David, but Black March took things to a whole new level. In the span of just 31 days, 131 Israelis—civilians and soldiers—were killed.

Suicide attack chased suicide attack, which was followed by shooting attacks. On March 2, for example, a suicide bomber blew himself up outside a Jerusalem synagogue while standing next to a crowd of women with strollers in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood. Ten people were murdered. Three days later, a gunman opened fire inside a popular seafood diner in Tel Aviv. Three people were murdered. Two days later, a terrorist broke into a pre-military academy in a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, killing five young students, and two days after that, a terrorist blew himself up inside the popular Moment Café in Jerusalem, just a stone's throw from the prime minister's official residence. Eleven people were killed.

Beyond the paralyzing fear of boarding buses or sitting in cafés that this terror wave instilled in Israelis, there was an understanding within the IDF and the government that the current situation could not continue.

By the time the Passover holiday came on March 27, some in Israel were praying for a new redemption like the one from ancient Egypt. No one could predict what was about to happen. On the night of the Seder—the festive Passover feast—a Palestinian bomber disguised as a woman walked into the Park Hotel in the seaside town of Netanya, just north of Tel Aviv, and blew himself up, killing thirty Israelis. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was

horrified and decided that same evening that enough was enough. Israel was going to change the paradigm. Two days later, he gave the green light to launch a full-scale offensive in the West Bank known as Operation Defensive Shield.

Defensive Shield and the operations that would grow out of it would carry on for several years, and like Israel's 2023 ground offensive in Gaza in response to the October 7 attacks, it had a similar objective: to destroy Hamas terrorist infrastructure and deny it the ability to carry out a similar mass-casualty attack in the future.

In Israel, Defensive Shield is widely regarded as a major success. It took time and forced Israel to enter every Palestinian city and town in the West Bank, but it achieved two important goals—the IDF regained operational freedom in a territory it had relinquished and it was able, as a result, to destroy the terrorist infrastructure that had been created there. But like in 2023 and throughout the war that ensued, one of the primary challenges in 2002 was about the day after and, specifically, how Israel would retain its successes. The answer, which is still applicable in the West Bank today, was to retain operational freedom. Ever since 2002, Israel has not stopped operating in the West Bank, or as one former Shin Bet chief told us—"mowing the terror lawn." That is the result of Defensive Shield.

The Park Hotel bombing illustrated something just as important—the complex structure and character of Hamas and the challenge for Israel in fighting it. The mastermind of the 2002 attack was a man by the name of Abbas al-Sayed, Hamas's military commander in the West Bank city of Tulkarm. In addition to his covert terrorist role, al-Sayed was also the public face of Hamas's political activities in the city. He was a terrorist and a politician, kind of like Ismail Haniyeh or Mousa Abu Marzook, the so-called Hamas political leaders who prostrated themselves on the carpet of their office suite in Qatar after hearing the news of the October 7 attacks.

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While in the West Bank Operation Defensive Shield was bringing the IDF some success, in Gaza, as much as Israel tried, it could not contain Hamas. The threat was growing from month to month, particularly in southern Gaza, along the Philadelphi Corridor between Gaza and Egypt. It was there

that Hamas had dug its smuggling tunnels, some of which, already back in 2005, were wide enough to drive a car through.

The first tunnels, dug by crime families to smuggle goods into Gaza, were commandeered by Hamas, which they used to smuggle in weapons as well as Iranian and Lebanese military advisors. Operatives used the tunnels to travel to training camps in Iran and Syria.

While Israel would periodically urge the Egyptians to crack down on Hamas's smuggling activities, Cairo was not terribly interested in doing so. Every few months, Israeli defense ministers would fly to meet with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak at the presidential palace in Cairo or at luxury seaside resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh. During these discussions, he would acknowledge the problem, but nothing came of it. The smuggling industry was bringing revenue to a neglected part of his country. He preferred to turn a blind eye.

So Israel tried to uncover the tunnels on its own, but that came at a steep price. In 2004, for example, an armored personnel carrier drove over a massive explosive device along the Gaza-Egyptian border, incinerating the Israeli troops inside. Dozens of soldiers were sent to sift through the sand on their hands and knees, searching for what remained of their comrades. Pictures of rows of soldiers crawling through the Gaza sand became a symbol for Israel's failed policies, etching themselves in the collective Israeli mind as calls mounted for Israel to withdraw from Gaza.

Instead, Israel tried using tools that had been effective in the past—isolated operations that were limited in scope. In response to the APC explosion, Israel initiated "Operation Rainbow" with the aim of locating and destroying the Hamas smuggling tunnels under the border. But the results were mixed. The IDF had gone into Rafah and encountered fierce fighting, and after ten days, forces had only located and destroyed three tunnels. There were still at least a dozen more believed to be there.

Around the same time, Ariel Sharon, once the father of Israel's settlements, announced a surprising plan calling for unilateral "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip. The plan would rock the country, creating a rift between the pro-settlement religious camp, which had long supported the former IDF general and Yom Kippur War hero, and the state. But Sharon insisted it was right for Israel, arguing that pulling out of the

Palestinian territory would buy Israel desperately needed goodwill from the international community, and particularly the United States.

In his seminal speech on the plan, Sharon argued that a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza—of settlers and IDF positions—would dramatically improve Israel's security.

"The purpose of the Disengagement Plan is to reduce terror as much as possible, and grant Israeli citizens the maximum level of security," the prime minister said at an address to the Herzliya Conference in December 2003, adding "these steps will increase security for the residents of Israel and relieve the pressure on the IDF and security forces in fulfilling the difficult tasks they are faced with."

"The Disengagement Plan is meant to grant maximum security and minimize friction between Israelis and Palestinians," he concluded.

In the run-up to the pullout, Israeli defense officials talked tough. One IDF officer took a group of reporters to a hill overlooking Gaza a few days before the withdrawal was supposed to begin and vowed that if even one rocket was fired, Israel would respond with unprecedented force. These were the days before Israel had developed Iron Dome, the innovative lifesaving rocket defense system, or constructed a sufficient number of bomb shelters and safe rooms in the south.

In his talks with the George W. Bush administration, Sharon had promised to pull back to the last inch of Gaza and to the international border so there would be no ground for claims that the Jewish state was still occupying the Palestinian territory.

Not everyone agreed with this plan. One opponent was General Yom Tov Samia, who until a year earlier had served as the head of the Southern Command, the military regional command responsible for the Gaza Strip. Samia was not an average IDF officer. He was old school, a student of history who earned a doctorate in political science. He spoke his mind, especially in the presence of authority. At a meeting a few months before the planned withdrawal, Samia told Sharon that he was making a mistake. His main concern was the Hamas smuggling that would continue without the IDF in the land.

"You can pull out of the settlements if that is your decision," Samia told Sharon. "But don't pull the soldiers from the Philadelphi Corridor.

Don’t pull away without coordinating with the PA, and stay there as a military force for a few years more to help the PA become stronger.”

Sharon did not listen, deciding instead to pull out completely. For a time, Hamas seemed to be playing along. Israel withdrew its settlers from Gaza in a gut-wrenching move that threatened to tear the nation apart, but when it closed the gates to Gaza, its mistake was thinking that security would be improved. In fact, Israel had set into motion a new phase in the way it would have to continue fighting in Gaza in the decades to come.

At the time, for example, the range of Hamas’s rockets was limited, and they barely flew ten miles. Within a year of the withdrawal, the range had grown to thirteen miles. In 2008, the range jumped to twenty-six miles, and in 2012, Hamas obtained Iranian rockets capable of striking Tel Aviv some forty miles away.

In 2005, almost all of Hamas’s rockets were manufactured domestically. By 2014, with smuggling unchecked along the border, Hamas was able to bring in longer-range missiles through its network of tunnels along the border with Egypt. Sometimes, if the missiles were too big to fit into a tunnel in one piece, they were disassembled before being smuggled and reassembled inside Gaza.

And the increase in the amount of rocket fire spoke for itself: In 2001, only four rockets were fired into Israel; by 2002, it was 34. In 2004, the number hit 281. During the disengagement from Gaza, Hamas understood the potential and sat on the sidelines. But by 2014, more than 12,000 rockets had been fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel, more than 1,000 of which rained down on one city, Sderot, making it the most visible symbol of the rocket conflict and paralyzing a town that had been established to serve as a safe haven for Jews who fled Turkey and Iran after Israel’s establishment. In the first month after the October 7 attacks, more than 10,000 rockets rained down across the country.

Alone in his jail cell, Sinwar understood what was coming and the potential the Israeli withdrawal created for change. In the aftermath of Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, he believed that the PA would be weak, that it would not be able to fend off the Hamas fighters who now had the support of the people based on a simple argument: that Hamas got Israel to withdraw from Gaza without giving them a single benefit in return. People now believed Hamas could do the same one day in the West Bank.

By the time elections were held for the Palestinian parliament in January 2006, Hamas's street cred had translated into political support. Under pressure from the United States, the PA held parliamentary elections, and Hamas scored a resounding victory, taking 74 of the 132 seats in parliament compared to just 45 for Fatah. Ismail Haniyeh, the former student union leader at the Islamic University, was installed as the new Palestinian prime minister.

Six months later, in June 2006, one of Sinwar's old ideas would bear fruit. In 1998, he had recommended that Hamas dig tunnels into Israel and use them to kidnap Israeli soldiers deployed along the border. One such tunnel was dug, but it was quickly discovered by Israel. While the plan had been thwarted, Sinwar did not give up.

On June 25, 2006, around 5:30 A.M., an armed Hamas squad popped out of a tunnel on the Israeli side of the border and abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Yahya Sinwar's younger brother Mohammed was part of the team that carried out the attack and then served as Shalit's prison guard, a sign of just how strategic an asset the Israeli soldier was for Hamas.

In 2007, Hamas continued to consolidate power. It established a unity government with Fatah with Haniyeh as prime minister, which was not to last; a few months later, Hamas evicted all of the Fatah members in a violent coup, throwing its rivals off Gaza rooftops and shooting others in the kneecaps. Hundreds of Fatah members stormed the crossings into Israel, begging to be let out of the Gaza Strip. Israel relented, and most of the Fatah members were allowed safe passage to the West Bank.

As Hamas tightened its grip on Gaza, it also gained sympathy on the Palestinian street. It ramped up its rocket attacks against Israel while simultaneously digging deeper under Gaza to fortify its positions and prepare for future conflicts, using ceasefires and lulls in fighting to recruit and train more tunnel teams.

In December 2008, the Israeli government decided it had had enough with the tunnel threat and sent the IDF Paratroopers Reconnaissance Battalion into Gaza to destroy a tunnel that intelligence showed was just three hundred yards from the border. The commander of the operation was Yaron Finkelman, who would continue to climb the ranks, serving as head of the Southern Command on October 7.

In response, Hamas launched hundreds of rockets into Israel, prompting Operation Cast Lead, the first large-scale ground offensive in Gaza since the pullout just over three years earlier. In a massive offensive involving artillery, infantry, and armored forces, Israel crisscrossed the Gaza Strip, taking up positions it had abandoned three years earlier. It went house to house, hunting down rocket launchers and weapon caches, while killing and capturing Hamas members along the way.

After two weeks on the ground, a fierce debate broke out in the security cabinet between Israel's generals and ministers. Yoav Gallant, head of the Southern Command at the time and the defense minister on October 7, advocated for continuing the ground maneuver, insisting that Hamas needed to pay a price for its rocket attacks. Timing, however, was not on his side, and the ministers decided to end the operation. Barack Obama's inauguration was just days away and Israel's government knew that it would not be good to start building a relationship with a new US president while a war was still raging in the Middle East.

When the operation ended, the Americans promised to create a mechanism that would curb the smuggling of weapons from the Sinai Peninsula into Gaza with the help of other NATO countries. In reality, nothing was done. Hamas continued to amass weapons, some coming from Libya, which had fallen into anarchy after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, and some from Iran, all right under the Egyptian army's nose.

Former senior Shin Bet and IDF officials said years later that if Israel had continued its ground offensive into the heart of Gaza City, the Hamas regime might have been toppled, and the more pragmatic Fatah, which had signed the Oslo Accords, could have been reinstated to control Gaza. Hamas rightly assessed that Israel was reluctant to go all the way, due to a mix of fear of casualties and a reluctance to once again occupy the land from which it had just recently withdrawn.

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Sinwar watched all of this from his jail cell. And when Israel balked at pushing all the way into Gaza, he saw it as validation of what he had learned in prison—Israelis were weak, and ultimately could be defeated.

In 2011, he finally got his chance to return to Gaza. After five years of talks, negotiations for the release of Gilad Shalit had culminated in a deal. Israel caved to Hamas's demands and agreed to release 1,027 Palestinian prisoners—280 of whom were serving life sentences and had proverbial "blood on their hands," including Sinwar, whose brother Mohammed insisted be included in the swap. It was the largest release of prisoners for a single soldier in the country's history and came after an immense public pressure campaign on the Netanyahu government. Yuval Bitton, the doctor who had treated Sinwar in prison, tried to fight the release of the top Hamas prisoner, but no one was willing to listen.

On the day the Palestinian prisoners were released, and before they boarded buses bound for Gaza, Israel demanded that they sign a pledge to not engage again in terrorism, warning that if they violated the agreement, they would be captured, imprisoned, and severely punished. Almost all the prisoners agreed to sign. But not Sinwar.

Upon arriving in Gaza, Sinwar was greeted like a Palestinian hero. He was draped in a green Hamas scarf and brought on stage, where he was embraced by an emotional Haniyeh, the Hamas leader in Gaza.

The Gaza Sinwar returned to had changed, and Hamas, too, had completely transformed. But so had Sinwar. He reconnected with Mohammed Deif, who took him around Gaza, showing him the terrorist group's new structure. Hamas was now in complete control of Gaza, and Sinwar used his prison cachet and status to climb the Hamas ranks, proving to be cunning and calculated as he built up Hamas's military capabilities.

Senior officials in Hamas's military wing quickly realized that Sinwar —narcissistic and ruthless—harbored a burning desire for revenge against Israel. Within months of his release, he was appointed the head of Hamas's military wing, and one of his first decisions was to establish a "West Bank Terrorist Command" that would be based in Gaza, composed of prisoners who had come from the West Bank but under the conditions of their release under the Shalit swap were now exiled to Gaza. This command was tasked with overseeing attacks in the West Bank from the distance of Gaza with the operatives leveraging their intimate knowledge of the area.

Sinwar aligned himself with three top Hamas operatives. There was Deif, the shadowy strategist; Sinwar's brother Mohammed, who was tasked with top-secret missions, including constructing strategic tunnels across

Gaza; and Marwan Issa, who served as a national security advisor until he was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza in March 2024. The group saw Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader now based in Qatar, as little more than their puppet, someone who did a good job representing Hamas in diplomatic settings in Doha, Tehran, and Damascus but who was easily manipulated to follow their lead on the decisions that really mattered.

As a child, Haniyeh had stood out in a Quran quiz organized by Mujama and caught the eye of Sheikh Yassin, who was one of the judges. After the awards were presented, Yassin took an interest in the boy, who had lost his father, and decided to take him under his wing.

Over the years, Haniyeh became Yassin's personal assistant and bodyguard, accompanying the wheelchair-bound Hamas spiritual leader wherever he went. Haniyeh was Yassin's messenger, relaying instructions and participating in secret strategic discussions with the group's top leadership. When Yassin was killed by the IDF in 2004, Haniyeh inherited Yassin's aura and respect, but because he lacked military expertise, his authority was not heeded by Deif, Sinwar, and the rest of the leadership group.

Sinwar quickly grasped that since Hamas was the de facto ruler of Gaza, the group had to act responsibly to ensure that health care was adequate and that the economy was running. Hamas now had security branches—a police force; an army with brigades, battalions, companies, and elite units; an arsenal of tens of thousands of rockets; and defense industries specializing in the development and production of drones, missiles, cyber weapons, and hundreds of miles of tunnels.

In 2012, Sinwar traveled from Gaza to Iran, where he met with the legendary Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, who would be killed in a US airstrike in Iraq in 2020. According to Shin Bet intelligence, Soleimani promised Sinwar strategic assistance in transforming Hamas's military arm into a formidable army, akin to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In return, Hamas would strengthen its strategic partnership within Iran's proxy arm, a partnership that would play out on October 7 when Hezbollah and other Shia militias in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria launched missiles, rockets, and drones at Israel in a show of solidarity with Hamas.

Another turning point in Hamas's military buildup took place around the same time when Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader,

replaced Hosni Mubarak as president of Egypt. Hamas saw an opportunity and seized it, using its close alliance with the new Egyptian government to increase the volume of weapons it could smuggle through the Rafah crossing. The numbers were unprecedented—advanced Iranian missiles, rockets, mortar shells, bullets, grenades, tons of quality explosives, and other military equipment. All of this artillery was stockpiled in tunnel warehouses and distributed among Hamas's different brigades and battalions.

The ousting of Morsi by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi marked a dramatic shift in Gaza's fortunes. Fearing Hamas would aid the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Sisi's government cleared the Egyptian side of Rafah, demolishing homes and tunnels. But it was too late—Hamas had already smuggled in the heavy equipment necessary to develop its defense industries, hidden deep underground and out of reach of Israeli airstrikes.

When Israel launched Operation Protective Edge in 2014, it once again sent Hamas the wrong message.

At first, Netanyahu refused to send in ground forces, agreeing only to airstrikes. But, when Hamas terrorists started popping out of tunnels, Netanyahu came under pressure from within the security cabinet, and he finally agreed to a limited incursion. Over the course of fifty days of fighting, the IDF advanced just a few kilometers over the border, with its primary objective being the destruction of the cross-border tunnels.

Netanyahu later explained that he opposed the operation because he wanted the IDF to focus on bigger threats. "Did I really want to tie down the IDF in Gaza for years when we had to deal with Iran and a possible Syrian front?" Netanyahu wrote in his 2022 memoir *Bibi*. "The answer was categorically no. I had bigger fish to fry."

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Israel didn't know at the time, but the hesitancy to go deep into Gaza emboldened Hamas, prompting Sinwar and Deif to upgrade their attack plans and to take even greater risks than what they thought was possible against Israel. They believed that Israel would never venture deep into Gaza and that the chance of an IDF reoccupation of Gaza was almost nonexistent, mostly due to an Israeli fear of casualties among soldiers and civilians.

Shin Bet soon detected a surge of weapons production in Gaza, driven by smuggled dual-use materials. Palestinian merchants, ostensibly importing supplies for Gaza's reconstruction after the 2014 war, were diverting them to Hamas to be used for weapons production. Pressured by Shin Bet, the Israeli government eventually banned the entry of engines, chemicals, communication devices, digging tools, and more.

While times were challenging, Sinwar was enjoying his new freedom and his ability to exact revenge on Israel. He would walk through the bustling Gaza streets, teasing Israeli drones that he knew hovered above while embracing and taking selfies with Gazans. Everywhere he went, and at every public event, Sinwar could be seen sitting with children on his lap or holding them in his arms. They were his personal human shields. Israel watched and followed from a distance but refrained from taking action, not realizing that it was falling right into a trap set by a man who had spent twenty-two years studying his prey.

In 2017, Sinwar was elected as the leader of Hamas in Gaza, replacing Haniyeh. A year later, as economic hardship and shortages of clean water, food, and electricity plagued Gaza, Sinwar joined the demonstrations that had started against Hamas and succeeded in redirecting the public anger toward Israel. He orchestrated weekly protests along the Israeli border, bringing tens of thousands of people, while banning the use of firearms to maintain international sympathy. Instead of guns, he had people fly incendiary balloons and kites, which looked innocuous at first, but when they landed, they set off large blazes throughout southern Israel.

During one briefing at Shin Bet, a senior official speculated that Sinwar's strategy was similar to how he operated in Israeli prisons, where he had led a number of successful strikes by prisoners and gained concessions through orchestrated unrest. Sinwar likely saw the Gaza Strip as a similar "prison," one without an airport, a seaport, or Palestinian-controlled border crossings. Sinwar thought the protests along the border would pressure Israel into easing the border restrictions.

By 2018, the IDF estimated that Gaza was on the brink of a humanitarian crisis. Some officers pushed to reopen the Erez crossing to Palestinian workers who had been mostly barred from entering Israel for almost a decade. They believed that enabling some economic stability, coupled with an investment in infrastructure, could help advance a long-

term truce with Hamas. These officers believed that stabilizing Gaza was preferable to launching a large-scale operation that would require reoccupying the entire Strip.

As one officer put it at the time, “Whoever conquers Gaza gets a gift—Gaza, and this is a burden that no one in the IDF wants.”

Violence increased in 2021, and Sinwar ordered his forces to fire rockets at Jerusalem to protest an Israeli flag march around the Old City. Israelis viewed the move as motivated by an attempt to strengthen Hamas’s position in ongoing economic negotiations with Israel and by Sinwar’s interest in burnishing his military credentials. After a year of negotiations with Israel over a long-term truce, some Hamas members thought that Sinwar had softened and was not cut out for leading the terrorist group; this attack was meant to prove them wrong.

During the twelve-day Guardian of the Walls operation, over four thousand rockets were fired at Israel, with sixteen hundred intercepted by Iron Dome. The IDF responded with airstrikes, targeting over fifteen hundred terrorist sites across Gaza, but once again refusing to use ground forces. Sinwar and his military commanders could only conclude what they already believed: Israel was indeed afraid.

And Sinwar knew how to send his own message. During the operation, Israel had bombed his office. When the operation was over—again with an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire—Sinwar returned to the rubble and was photographed sitting in an armchair, legs crossed and arms spread wide, while flashing a defiant smile.

A few days later, Sinwar gave a speech claiming that Hamas had only used half its strength in the recent battle with Israel. The consecutive rounds of violence were not leading anywhere, and both sides understood it. Sinwar then said something that should have given Israel pause: “If the conflict breaks out again—the shape of the Middle East will change.”

His message was clear. What would come next was anyone’s guess, but one thing was for certain—Sinwar was far from finished.

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5

Targeted Strikes

Shortly after the Guardian of the Walls operation and Sinwar's speech, a new government took office in Jerusalem, led by a young politician named Naftali Bennett. It was the first time in thirteen years that someone other than Netanyahu was sitting in the aquarium, the glass-lined suite of offices in the drab and gray Jerusalem building known as the Prime Minister's Office. Netanyahu—who had ruled the country consecutively since 2009—was now in the opposition.

In the IDF, the feeling was that the recent operation had been a major success and that after twelve days of extensive aerial bombings, Hamas was weakened and deterred.

The IDF Spokesperson's Office later bragged that "by combining its military defense capabilities with proactive military strikes, the IDF was able to destroy a large amount of Hamas's weapons-manufacturing capabilities in order to bring an enduring calm to the people of Israel."

Aharon Haliva, head of Aman, predicted the same at the time. "If there is one thing that [Hamas leader] Yahya Sinwar wants, it is to go back to May 10 at 5:59 P.M. and cancel the order to fire rockets at Jerusalem," he said just two weeks after the operation had ended and as Bennett prepared to take office.

Beyond the blows the IDF thought it had inflicted upon Hamas, what contributed to this assessment was how the terrorist group had decided to sit out one of the more recent operations in Gaza—Operation Black Belt in November 2019—which the IDF had launched exclusively against Islamic

Jihad. Despite pressure from its terrorist counterparts, Hamas decided not to get involved at the time, an act it would follow a year later during another IDF operation against Islamic Jihad.

This led intelligence analysts to believe that Hamas was calculated in its priorities—it wanted economic prosperity and stability, not war.

What should have caught the IDF's attention was the way Sinwar was talking and acting after Guardian of the Walls, and especially the photo of him smiling in an armchair in his bombed home. Sinwar was walking around Gaza without fear that Israel would dare to kill him.

Bennett saw it all and demanded change. A former chief of staff to Netanyahu and member of several of his coalitions, Bennett had come from the Israeli right and previously served as the head of the settler lobby, but he had crossed partisan lines to form a government with the left and an Arab party with the aim of removing Netanyahu from power. One of the changes he wanted to institute was the government's policy vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip.

In his first weeks in office, the new prime minister spoke tough. He promised an immediate response to every incendiary balloon that Hamas flew over the border. He approved an escalated response to any Hamas violation of the post-operation ceasefire and warned that violence would be met with a fierce Israeli response.

"I again clarify here: things have changed," Bennett said at the start of a weekly cabinet meeting in July 2021. "Israel is interested in calm and has no interest in harming Gaza residents, but violence … will be met with a strong response."

What the public didn't know was at this time Bennett had ordered the IDF and Shin Bet to prepare plans to eliminate all of Hamas's leaders—Sinwar, Deif, Issa, and a few others. The request caught the IDF by surprise. With Guardian of the Walls considered a success, the IDF chief of staff Lieutenant General Aviv Kohavi was solely focused on what in Israel were described as "third circle threats," a reference to Iran and stopping its nuclear program.

In one of their meetings, Kohavi pushed back. "Hamas is deterred, and there is no need to risk an all-out war with such an operation," he told the prime minister. But Bennett was determined and ordered Kohavi to move ahead with the plans.

At almost all of Bennett's regular meetings with the IDF chief of staff and Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar, they would discuss the elimination of the Hamas leaders. The IDF stalled a bit but ultimately moved the plan ahead, giving it different operational names depending on which of the Hamas members—whether all of them or just a few—would end up being targeted in an airstrike.

Bennett's approach was one of carrots and sticks. While he claimed to have changed the containment policy, ordering the IDF to now respond to every rocket attack or incendiary balloon flown across the border, he also allowed—for the first time in years—for Palestinians from Gaza to enter Israel for work. The first approval was for two thousand workers, a quota that Bennett then increased to five thousand, and eventually as high as fourteen thousand.

"Understand that a worker in Gaza makes NIS eight hundred a month, and in Israel he makes ten times that—NIS eight thousand," Bennett tweeted. "Hundreds of thousands of Gazans are living off the salaries of these workers, and Hamas doesn't want to hurt them."

The intelligence that Aman and Shin Bet presented—now known to be wrong—appeared to back this assessment. In January 2022, Sinwar's father passed away, and Qatar's envoy to Gaza, a former diplomat by the name of Mohammed Al Emadi, who would occasionally pass on messages from one side to the other, traveled to Gaza to make a condolence call. Yes, Sinwar was a terrorist, but Qatar had an open line of communication with him. After a few days, Al Emadi reported back to Israel that Sinwar remained pragmatic and understood that he needed to stop the protests at the border for the Qatari money to keep flowing.

But then in March 2022, everything changed. Palestinian terrorists started striking throughout Israel. On March 22, four people were killed in an attack in the southern city of Beersheba; five days later, two people were killed in an attack in the northern city of Hadera; two days after that, five people were killed in the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak; and a week later three people were shot dead in Tel Aviv.

Terror attack followed terror attack, and Bennett—who had promised to restore security—was losing his patience.

May 5 pushed Bennett over the edge. It was Israel's Independence Day, and in the city of Elad, east of Tel Aviv, people were cleaning up the

barbecues they had just finished at a local park when two Palestinian attackers showed up with axes and a pistol, hacking and shooting at local bystanders. Four people were killed.

Sinwar, it turned out, had given a speech a few days earlier urging Palestinians to strike Israelis with whatever they had—including axes. “Let everyone who has a rifle, ready it. And if you don’t have a rifle, ready your cleaver or an axe, or a knife,” the Hamas leader said.

The connection was clear. Sinwar spoke in Gaza and instigated terrorist attacks in Israel. He needed to be stopped.

A few days following the park attack, Bennett brought up the assassination plans at a security briefing. Bar, who had become the head of Shin Bet seven months earlier, supported the idea, but Kohavi remained opposed. He told the prime minister that the IDF was constantly tracking Sinwar and recently had him in its sights as he drove through Gaza City. The problem was that that he was part of a three-car convoy, and the IDF couldn’t always tell which car he was in.

“We have a lot of bigger challenges in the north and against Iran,” the IDF chief told the prime minister. “If you want me to advance a plan to kill Sinwar, you will need to first convince me that it is worth the war that will follow since I will be the one who will need to explain why this war happened to the soldiers and the bereaved parents.”

This was not the way IDF officers were meant to speak to the country’s political leadership. In democracies, prime ministers do not need to convince the military chief of their decisions.

But then again, Bennett was not viewed as a traditional prime minister. Yes, he was chosen to lead and to form the government by a majority of members of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, but he had only six seats in the coalition of sixty-one, and he had gotten the job of prime minister simply because, if he hadn’t, the so-called Change Government that replaced Netanyahu would not have been possible. Being prime minister is what allowed Bennett to cross partisan lines, join with the Left, and establish the government. Kohavi knew all of this and sensed Bennett’s weakness. The IDF chief was in his last year in office and felt he didn’t have much to lose.

Bennett tried to rally support within the security cabinet but had no success. Yair Lapid, the foreign minister and the man who pulled the real

strings within the government, opposed the idea. Benny Gantz, the defense minister, also thought that it was unnecessary.

In the end, Bennett understood something simple—the makeup of his coalition would not allow such an operation to take place. Part of the sixty-one-member coalition was the Israeli-Arab Ra'am Party.

An Israeli preemptive strike against Hamas would almost definitely have led to a large-scale war in Gaza, and Ra'am would have bolted the coalition. Bennett would be without a parliamentary majority, and Israel would have a new election. So he held back, like Netanyahu before him—a decision that would come back to haunt the country.

The story of Bennett's attempt to advance plans to eliminate Hamas leadership was not unique. Over the years, consecutive heads of Shin Bet have recommended the elimination of Hamas leadership in Gaza to prime ministers. In at least a dozen different cases, Shin Bet and the IDF prepared plans and presented them to the prime minister to do so. In some cases, the prime minister finally agreed to strike, but only under restrictions that made the success of the operation almost impossible. In most cases, the prime minister refused to advance the plans, fearing that they would lead to an all-out war with Hamas and possibly beyond. In other cases, the considerations were political.

One such operation was brought to Netanyahu in 2016, two years after the end of Operation Protective Edge. Nadav Argaman, head of Shin Bet at the time, called the targeted killing operation "Musical Chairs." The defense minister at the time, Avigdor Lieberman, supported it, but Netanyahu rejected the proposal, fearing an escalation at a time of relative quiet.

"We were told to be prepared and to prepare an operational plan," Argaman, the head of Shin Bet from 2016 to 2021, recalled in a TV interview. "We pushed for it and we presented plans."

But, according to Argaman, Shin Bet never received an answer from the government.

This was the case through the summer of 2023 and even in the weeks ahead of the October 7 attacks. At the end of August, an organization in Gaza called the Supreme National Authority for the Great March of Return and Breaking the Siege announced that it was restarting protests along the border with Israel.

The organization, which had led similar protests back in 2018, brought tractors and heavy equipment near the border to prepare tent camps for the demonstrators, who would not stop, they said, until they were allowed to return to the lands in Israel from which they were evicted in 1948.

On September 1, as more than two million Israeli children started the school year, about one hundred Palestinians rioted near the security fence, throwing IEDs and making several attempts to cross the barrier, drawing IDF sniper fire. The rioters waved Palestinian flags, burned tires, and chanted slogans against Israel's presence on the Temple Mount and near the Al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as against the treatment of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The Gaza Health Ministry claimed that nine people were wounded that day.

From there, the situation escalated quickly. By the end of September, Israel was attacking targets near the border as IEDs regularly blew up nearby. Troops were reinforced as incendiary devices tied to helium balloons were launched once again into Israel to burn fields and homes.

After weeks of clashes, Netanyahu, back as prime minister, finally convened a meeting of his top national security staff on September 26. But the focus was on anything but Gaza. Hours into the discussion, Gaza did not even come up as a topic, even though the protests were still occurring along the border. Instead, IDF chief Halevi and Shin Bet chief Bar focused their briefing on the West Bank and the fear that the protests in Gaza would spread there.

In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, the IDF realized what the protests were really about. They were not about raising awareness about alleged Israeli violations of the status quo on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem but meant to serve an entirely different purpose—to "normalize" the presence of protesters near the border, something that served Hamas when it sent the first teams that dark Saturday morning to blow multiple holes in the barrier and storm Israel.

Around the same time at the Knesset, Military Intelligence officers briefed the prestigious Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. The Israeli parliamentarians—used to being exposed to the most classified intelligence—heard the latest on Iran's nuclear program, Hezbollah's efforts to increase its arsenal of precision-guided munitions, and the future of the West Bank.

After five hours, when one of the Knesset members asked the intelligence officers about Gaza, he received a curt answer. The officer closed the briefing folder and placed it back in his briefcase: “Hamas is deterred,” was all he said.

Back at the prime minister’s office, when the security cabinet meeting was over, its official press release did not contain much. But leaks to the media revealed something else: Itamar Ben-Gvir, the firebrand national security minister in charge of the police, had apparently been left out of the meeting, even though by law the minister is a statutory member of the security cabinet.

The explanation given was that Ben-Gvir—one of the most extreme politicians ever to be elected in Israel and whose ultranationalist Jewish Power Party had previously called for the expulsion of “disloyal” Palestinians and the annexation of the West Bank—constantly disrupted the cabinet meetings and didn’t allow for substantive conversations.

A source close to Netanyahu was quoted saying: “He comes to meetings and repeatedly pushes to renew targeted killings or to ban allowing Palestinian workers into Israel from the Gaza Strip, as well as various closures on all kinds of villages and cities in the West Bank. He does not understand that such a policy would prevent the prime minister from being able to fly anywhere in the world.”

But this did not deter Ben-Gvir, who was used to being sidelined as a rabble-rouser. When Hamas issued threats to kill him, he called for the assassination of the spokesman of Hamas. Later, intelligence officials raised the possibility that Ben-Gvir’s assassination threats, and Hamas’s fears that they would come true, played a role in pushing Sinwar to launch the assault on October 7, earlier than initially planned. Apparently, the Hamas leader wanted to attack first.

Ben-Gvir is without a doubt one of the more radical politicians who has ever held office in Israel. He has been arrested and indicted dozens of times and convicted on seven counts, including charges of incitement to racism against Arabs and support for a recognized terrorist group (Kach). Still, his instincts proved right. Israel missed an opportunity to take the initiative against Hamas. What Ben-Gvir did not know was that consecutive prime ministers had passed up the opportunity.

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In its nearly eight decades of statehood, Israel has mastered the art of targeted killings, integrating the practice into regular military doctrine and operations. It is a tactic Israel has successfully used on battlefields for more than two decades and combines cutting-edge technology, high-quality intelligence, and Israel's best and brightest minds.

The State of Israel did not invent targeted killings. They were used in the time of the Bible, during the Roman rule over the Land of Israel, through the Ottoman period, and from the beginning of the Zionist settlement of what was then known as Palestine when underground Jewish militias—Haganah, Etzel, and Lechi—carried out targeted assassinations of their opponents.

After the establishment of Israel, the state continued to carry out targeted killings and assassinations. In the 1950s, for example, Mossad killed two Egyptian intelligence officers who had helped Fedayeen militants launch a series of attacks against Israeli towns and communities. In the 1960s, Israel sent letter bombs to German scientists who were helping Egypt develop long-range missiles. In 1972, following the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, Prime Minister Golda Meir authorized a years-long operation to avenge the athletes' murders and to kill all of the Palestinian terrorists involved.

"It's not an eye for an eye," a former head of Shin Bet was quoted describing the policy in *The Washington Post* on August 26, 2006. "It's having him [the enemy] for lunch before he has you for dinner."

It wasn't until late 2000 that targeted killings became one of the country's main fighting tools and a key method in Israel's battle against Palestinian terrorism. It is true that targeted killings are complicated to carry out—they require precise intelligence and identifying the right moment to attack—but they can also be highly effective in undermining an enemy's ability to continue to operate.

In the early 2000s, when Israel first found itself up against Hamas, it had to contend with this enemy recruiting kids as young as fifteen—boys and girls—to serve as suicide bombers. And while Israel was doing everything it could to prevent this, the terrorists almost always got through into Israel to attack.

In the IDF and Shin Bet, officials suggested various courses of action. Arrest raids were carried out, money smugglers were detained, explosives labs were destroyed, and radical imams were jailed.

For the targeted killings, names would regularly be brought before the defense minister for discussion—who the targets were, what they were involved in, and whether it was possible to arrest them. If a physical arrest was deemed too risky—for example, if the person never left downtown Gaza City—the option of a targeted killing was put on the table.

A number of IDF chiefs of staff carried small notepads with lists of names of wanted men. One IDF chief said that his list reached one thousand names, with each terror group—Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah—having its own color. When a target was hit, the name was crossed off.

One of the dilemmas in eliminating a terrorist is that someone will always take that terrorist's place. Will the new terrorist be more extreme or more moderate? Will the terrorist's death lead to more violence or less? Defense officials often argue that even if the terrorist under discussion deserves to be killed, the devil you know may be better than the devil you don't know.

IDF intelligence officers often refer back to the targeted killing of Abbas al-Musawi, the leader of Hezbollah, on February 16, 1992. Initially, the mission was meant as a "snatch-and-grab" operation. Israeli commandos from Sayeret Matkal—the General Staff Reconnaissance Unit—had practiced crossing covertly into Lebanon, getting close enough to the devout Shiite follower of Iranian ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and bringing him back to Israel. When drones showed that Musawi was heavily guarded and surrounded by massive crowds, the IDF decided to change the operation. Two Apache attack helicopters were scrambled, and one of them fired a Hellfire missile that ripped into Musawi's Mercedes sedan, killing him, his wife, and his six-year-old son.

While the reaction was fierce—dozens of Katyusha rockets were fired into Israel, and a month later, a Ford pickup truck loaded with 340 kilograms of TNT exploded outside the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing twenty-nine people—the real mistake was not considering who would replace Musawi. A few days after the killing, Hezbollah announced that its new leader was a thirty-one-year-old sheikh by the name of Hassan

Nasrallah, and in the years since, Nasrallah turned Hezbollah into a powerful adversary.

Nasrallah, who was killed in an Israeli bombing in Beirut in September 2024, formalized Hezbollah's alliance with Iran and gained access to advanced weaponry, with a missile arsenal bigger than most Western countries, and loads of cash that he used to recruit the largest guerilla force in the world. When Sinwar launched the October 7 attacks against Israel, he was under the impression that Hezbollah would immediately get involved and launch a similar attack of its own from Lebanon. Documents discovered by the IDF during its operation in Gaza and believed to have been written by a top Hamas official, possibly Sinwar, indicated as much.

When Hezbollah did not attack from the ground, Aman assumed that the Lebanese group was upset with the choice of timing. Hezbollah instead, in the beginning, seemed to be paying lip service to its Palestinian counterpart by firing rockets and anti-tank missiles into northern Israel, but not deeper into the country.

Over the years, Israel has invested tremendous resources into perfecting the art of targeted killings. Some of the skills, tactics, and technologies resulted from studying mistakes and failed missions. Others were specially developed for specific operations, like the booby-trapped Motorola flip phone used to kill Yahya Ayyash in 1996.

Unfortunately for Israel, it fell in love with these targeted strikes. Still today, there are Shin Bet chiefs who are certain that if the current Hamas leaders had been eliminated, October 7 would not have happened, whereas others in the security establishment are convinced that someone else would have taken up the reins and carried on with the operation.

And during the war in Gaza, Israel put an emphasis on targeting those responsible. It killed Deif, Issa, Haniyeh, and dozens of other mid-level brigade and battalion commanders. As important as these men were, Hamas was not destroyed as a result, but there is no doubt that losing top leadership undermines capabilities, albeit for a short period of time.

Targeted killings will always raise questions, particularly when they are carried out against a popular movement like Hamas, which is much more than just a group of insurgents. Hamas is the government in Gaza, it runs the schools, the hospitals, the welfare system, and more. Killing one, five, or even one hundred top terrorists will not break its back.

Nevertheless, if there is one mission that almost everyone in the defense establishment looks back on as the one that could have changed the Middle East, it is from 2003, and it was named, strangely enough, for a flower.

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Israel was just over two years into the Second Intifada, but despite retaking the West Bank and operating freely in Gaza, the military was not able to stop the attacks inside Israeli cities. It was rounding up terror suspects and breaking up infrastructure, but the attacks continued.

In a double suicide bombing in January 2003, twenty-three people were killed outside the central bus station in Tel Aviv; in March, seventeen people were killed when a suicide bomber blew up in Haifa; in April, a security guard was killed while stopping a suicide bomber from entering a train station in Kfar Saba; and a few days later, three people were killed and another sixty injured when a suicide bomber blew up at the Mike's Place beachfront pub in Tel Aviv.

On August 19, a Palestinian Hamas member from the West Bank city of Hebron, disguised as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, boarded the number 2 bus in Jerusalem's predominant ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Shmuel HaNavi and blew himself up. The extra long bus was packed that day, ferrying mostly schoolchildren home after a field trip to the Western Wall, one of Judaism's holiest prayer sites.

Seven children were killed alongside sixteen adults, including a woman eight months pregnant. More than 130 were injured by the bomb that had been filled with metal ball bearings to increase death and injuries.

Almost all of these attacks were carried out by Hamas, which had by this time transformed into a lethal terrorist group, far deadlier than what anyone could have imagined back when it was founded in the late 1980s.

Ariel Sharon, the ex-IDF general and now prime minister, had made a miraculous political comeback three years earlier. He expressed his devastation after every attack that killed Israelis. "Jews deserve to live. Stop protecting the terrorists and start protecting the Jews," he would tell the IDF generals who sometimes pushed back on his orders to increase Israeli counterterror operations.

The IDF needed to respond, and that is what it did two days later when three Hellfire missiles, fired from an Apache helicopter, slammed into a car driving down a side street in Gaza City. If until then Israel had used targeted killings to go after Hamas military commanders, this time it killed Ismail Abu Shanab, one of the founders of Hamas, educated in the United States and until then looked at as the terrorist group's most moderate senior member.

Israel was showing that no one affiliated with Hamas was immune. Even the political echelon was now a fair target. Concerned with this escalation, Sheikh Yassin, Hamas's primary founder, convened a secret gathering on September 6, and everyone was ordered to come: Yassin, Deif, Haniyeh, and Adnan al-Ghoul, Hamas's explosives expert. These men were responsible for an incredible number of murdered Israelis.

This group represented Israel's most wanted, men who never gathered together and always made sure to surround themselves with children and women. They lived the lives of men on the run, constantly switching apartments and rarely staying in the same place more than two nights in a row.

It was, Israeli officials later explained, the equivalent of Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and Ayman al-Zawahiri all sitting together in the same building and the United States knowing exactly where they were.

Israeli intelligence agents heard rumblings about the meeting, and when one informant first told his Israeli handler about it, the heads of the IDF and Shin Bet didn't believe that such a summit was even possible. But as more information came in from various sources, it was clear that the meeting was happening. As one top official said at the time, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Israel did not know where the officials were going to meet, only the basic timeframe—the afternoon of Saturday, September 6. Shin Bet knew who had been invited and started to track each of the invitees, placing over a dozen drones over the small Gaza Strip.

"We figured that at least one of them would take us to the meeting place," explained Major General Israel Ziv, head of IDF Operations at the time.

Because no one was even 100 percent sure that the meeting would take place, planning was tentative. Nevertheless, intelligence officials identified three possible meeting points. Each was quickly studied by the air force's damage assessment teams to determine the right munition to be used in the attack.

The first option was the worst—an apartment in a high-rise building. There would be very little way to strike without causing significant collateral damage. The second option was a house in a crowded area with other homes located very close by. Even a small bomb, with a warhead of just a few dozen kilograms of explosives, would damage the other houses. The third option for the meeting, an isolated building, was the most optimal but also had its challenges.

By Friday afternoon, the meeting seemed like it was happening. Avi Dichter, the head of Shin Bet at the time, had his agents sweep Gaza for any available piece of intel to verify that the Hamas leaders were going to meet and to try to pinpoint which of the three options would serve as the location.

Dichter had assumed the Shin Bet mantle just two months before the failed Camp David summit in 2000 that led to the Second Intifada. In the three years since, he had been engaged in a daily battle against a wave of Palestinian suicide bombers that no one in Shin Bet had been prepared for. Dichter was in charge of an agency that was constantly adapting and improvising.

Born to Holocaust survivors in the coastal city of Ashkelon just north of Gaza, Dichter had enlisted in the IDF's elite Sayeret Matkal unit, participating in countless missions, including the crossing of the Suez Canal during the Yom Kippur War.

In Shin Bet he learned that the war on terror was something different. There are no enemy tanks, no enemy battalions, and no enemy artillery batteries. Instead, terrorists can cause the same damage—and sometimes even more—by utilizing a suicide bomber disguised as an Israeli. They can fire a rocket from a house, paralyze a city, and shut down an airport.

This meant that Israel needed new tools with which to counter the threat. It needed to use the weapons it already had—tanks, missiles, and soldiers—in a more surgical way, one that could locate, identify, and then strike at a single target aiming a gun from a window or plotting a suicide attack from a basement.

One of the more complicated challenges was getting all of the different branches of the defense establishment to work together and synergize the flow of information, particularly between the Israeli air force and Shin Bet. While Shin Bet brought the intelligence about the location of the target, it was up to the IAF to attack. This raised the question of who was responsible for the mission—the provider of the intelligence or the launcher of the missile.

For Israel's targeted killing campaign to work, Dichter knew that it needed to run smoothly, without hiccups caused by ego battles over who gets credit or who is in charge. He went to the commander of the IAF, and the two agreed that there needed to be one "joystick" that ran the mission. It would start within Shin Bet, which would be responsible, in coordination with Aman, for identifying and validating the target, and then it would be passed on to the IAF, which would carry out the actual attack.

The one caveat was that since Shin Bet was responsible for the incrimination, it could also de-incriminate a target and—until the last second before the bomb was launched—call it off if intelligence indicated something had changed.

With the Hamas summit growing close, everyone was on pins and needles. Knowing that the time frame would be short, Moshe Yaalon, the IDF chief of staff at the time, prepared the defense minister in advance and asked that he approve the strike. The defense minister, in return, updated the prime minister.

On Saturday morning, Dichter and Shin Bet were the first at bat. Dichter walked into the agency's windowless command center early in the morning, getting a whiff of some of the chocolate pastries the agents had been munching on through the night shift.

Ziv and Yaalon were still at home, waiting for the green light from Dichter. To release some of the tension, Yaalon, a veteran commando who had climbed the IDF ranks to become chief of staff, jogged along the beach, then swam for about twenty minutes. Ziv was trying to spend some time with his family. By 11 A.M., the action began.

The drones and human agents who had been tracking the top Hamas leaders all indicated that their targets were on the move. The meeting appeared to be happening.

The chosen location, which was initially deemed the most optimal for a strike because it was the most secluded, was a home in the upscale Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City, situated along the sandy Mediterranean coastline. The three-story building belonged to Dr. Marwan Abu Ras, a lecturer at the Islamic University in Gaza and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Abu Ras was considered a legitimate target. He was a member of Hamas and had said repeatedly that the most hateful people in the world were Jews. “We will never accept the Jews, even if it costs us our blood and our souls,” Abu Ras declared once in a Palestinian TV interview.

As a result, his family—if they were going to be home for the meeting—were considered by IDF lawyers to be within the scope of legal collateral damage. Yaalon later explained that since the family had invited Hamas’s leadership into their home, their deaths would be legitimate if they were killed in an Israeli airstrike.

Some of the Hamas members walked to the Abu Ras residence; others were driven to the front door. Some tried to disguise themselves or wore keffiyehs to cover their faces.

It was like the red carpet for terrorists. A Shin Bet agent in the operations center called out each participant upon his arrival. Everyone knew who they were. There was Deif, the newly installed commander of the Hamas military wing whom Israel had been trying to kill for years; Ahmed Jabari, a top Hamas field commander; Haniyeh, the right hand to Sheikh Yassin; al-Ghoul, largely credited with inventing the Hamas-made Qassam rocket; Mahmoud al-Zahar; one of the founders of Hamas; and of course, the sheikh himself, who was pushed through the front door in his wheelchair.

Three of these men would end up playing a key role in the October 7 attacks—Deif, who planned the Hamas invasion with Sinwar; Haniyeh, who orchestrated Hamas’s overseas operations from Doha; and al-Zahar, who provided the ideological foundation for the attacks with books like *The End of the Jews*, a tome glorifying violence against Jews in Europe while praising the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, and whose cover features a dagger piercing a Star of David.

But then the situation took a turn. While the Abu Ras residence was originally considered the most optimal type of location to strike, satellite

imagery and drone footage showed another building, just about five meters away, with approximately forty families living inside. While the Abu Ras house was considered a legitimate target, now there were questions about the blast radius and the impact level a strike would have on the building nearby. With the meeting taking place in the middle of the day on Saturday, kids would definitely be home from school. The street outside and the forty-family building next door would be packed.

The air force's damage assessment team kicked into high gear. The physicists, engineers, mathematicians, and architects started analyzing the target and the nearby building and considered the impact point, the direction of the blast, and the radius of the explosion. The team explained to Yaalon that in order to ensure complete destruction of the Abu Ras home and the elimination of the Hamas leadership, the air force would need to drop a one-ton bomb on the structure.

But using a one-ton bomb on the Abu Ras home would almost definitely cause extensive damage to the nearby building and kill many of its occupants.

It was like an exact replay of a strike a year earlier that had traumatized Israel—a debacle that still weighed heavily on everyone in the room, had scarred the chief of staff, and created a rift between the Israeli government and its closest ally, the United States.

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The traumatic attack took place in July 2002 and killed Salah Shehada, Hamas's top military commander. Like the lives of many other Hamas commanders before and after him, Shehada's was an illustration of how Yassin operated, how he recruited his close followers, and how he radicalized them.

Shehada had been born in 1953 to a poor family that had originated in Jaffa and resettled in Gaza after they fled Israel following the establishment of the state in 1948. Fishing was the main source of income in the Shati refugee camp, and Shehada's father barely managed to scrape together a living. After completing high school, Shehada, a tall and burly teenager who initially dreamed of becoming a doctor and helping the people of Gaza,

traveled to Egypt and enrolled at Alexandria University to pursue a degree in social work.

The second-largest city in Egypt, Alexandria was a bustling metropolis back in the early 1970s, especially as perceived by a young man who had grown up in a dusty, impoverished refugee camp in Gaza. Egypt was going through a complicated period during the 1970s. Islamic radicals who wanted to kill President Anwar el-Sādāt attacked the military college in Cairo in 1974, and bread riots broke out across the country after the government cut subsidies to basic commodities. The first protests had originated in Alexandria.

It was only natural, then, that social work was not the only subject Shehada had studied in Egypt by the time he returned to Gaza. During his time in Alexandria, he fell in with a group of student activists in the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sunni Islamist group that had been founded fifty years earlier in the nearby city of Ismailia, located along the Suez Canal.

Now indoctrinated, Shehada started to attend prayers at the local mosque, where he ran into a neighbor he had not known before—Sheikh Yassin, wheelchair-bound and half blind, who would go on to found Hamas and serve as its spiritual leader. The two hit it off, and Shehada became one of Yassin's first Hamas recruits. In the mid-1980s he was arrested with Yassin.

"He was very smart, sophisticated, and cunning," explained Micha Koubi, the Shin Bet agent who interrogated Shehada during one of his prison stints in the 1980s. "He was very extreme. He repeatedly told me that he hates us and that the moment he can carry out an attack that will cause us damage he will do it."

When Shehada was released in 1986, he started taking Hamas to the next level. He forged Hamas's first alliance with Iran, helped develop and manufacture the first Qassam rockets that were fired from Gaza in October 2001, and was the mastermind behind a series of horrific terrorist attacks. During his last two years on earth, Shehada planned and oversaw more than 100 terrorist attacks against Israel, killing 474 people and wounding over 2,500 more. Some of the attacks were carried out by thirteen-year-olds that Shehada recruited and radicalized.

All of this put Shehada at the top of Israel's most-wanted list. He knew that the IDF was watching his every move, and he acted accordingly. He

switched safe houses, chosen purposely in densely populated residential areas, on a regular basis, and always made sure to be with either his wife or one of his daughters. A human shield, he figured, would stop Israel from attacking.

In Israel, there was immense pressure to carry out a strike against him. According to intelligence information obtained from agents in Gaza, Shehada was planning an unprecedented attack in size and scope, something the likes Israel had never seen before.

One report spoke about plans to rig a truck with one ton of explosives to blow up the recently constructed Gush Katif bridge, the sole route used by hundreds of Israelis who at the time lived in Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. Shehada was also believed to be planning a number of simultaneous car bomb explosions aimed outside large apartment buildings. So soon after 9/11, some defense officials spoke about Shehada as if he was in the same league as Osama bin Laden.

It was said that he was planning to abduct soldiers and civilians to gain the release of Palestinians in Israeli jails, and it was believed that he was working on rigging a boat with explosives to detonate on a popular Israeli beach.

Fierce debates in the defense establishment broke out about how to stop him. Since a ground operation was too risky, Israeli legal experts approved a targeted strike from the air, but only on the condition that there would be minimal collateral damage. Twice during the spring of 2002, Israeli fighter jets had taken off after Shin Bet claimed to have obtained intelligence on Shehada’s whereabouts. In both cases, the strikes were called off after too many civilians were detected in the planned strike zone.

In those initial planned attacks, the IDF’s actions were strictly limited. But after Hamas attacks continued following the two called-off airstrikes, the defense minister decided to loosen the restrictions. Children, he told Yaalon, were a no-go, but the presence of Shehada’s wife was no longer a reason to disengage.

Israel kept a watchful eye on Shehada, with agents on the ground, cell phone tracking, and drones. In the middle of July, Shehada fell off the map for a few days. Shin Bet was not sure what had happened, but then on July 22 he resurfaced in a safe house in the Daraj Quarter in Gaza City.

The operation went through meticulous planning. Mock runs were conducted in the Negev Desert in southern Israel, which is the air force's training ground, and bombs were dropped on an apartment building similar to those where Shehada kept his safe houses.

Among air force leadership, the debate was not just about the munition to be used but also about the method with which to attack. Some officers suggested using a Hellfire missile launched from an Apache helicopter. While such an attack would be more accurate and the damage would be smaller in scope, the missile blast radius in some cases was actually too small, giving the target a chance to escape.

The other proposal, dropping a bomb from an airplane, had its advantages—it would most definitely eliminate the target—but carried with it a greater chance for collateral damage. There were also debates over the munition—some officers suggested dropping two half-ton bombs in quick succession. This idea was later rejected out of fear that one would miss, causing greater collateral damage.

On July 22, 2002, the IDF was confident that it had finally caught Shehada as alone as he would ever be. He was in a building with his wife that was believed to be mostly empty, and while there were some civilians in the buildings nearby, the area was quiet.

After his location had been verified by multiple intelligence sources, it was time to get the defense minister's approval. The problem was that the minister was at Heathrow Airport in London and about to board a plane back to Israel. His military aide was tasked with getting him on the phone to connect the heads of intelligence and the air force.

"We have Shehada in our crosshairs," the IDF officers told the defense minister.

"Who is with him?" the minister asked.

"Just his wife," one of the officers replied.

"Then go for it," the defense minister said.

At 11 P.M. at the air force's Hatzor base just north of Gaza, an alarm sounded and the 105 Squadron pilots boarded their planes. The flight from Hatzor to Gaza takes just two minutes, and the pilots were told to head west and approach from over the Mediterranean so Shehada potentially would not hear the jets and suspect that someone was coming for him.

The crew did not even know who the target was. After they boarded their planes, the squadron commander climbed the ladder next to one of the F-16s, leaned into the cockpit and asked the pilot and navigator if they wanted to know who it was. “It doesn’t make a difference,” the airmen explained, shutting the canopy over their heads. They had a mission and trusted their commanders that it was legitimate and legal.

The planes flew circles over the Mediterranean for almost an hour when the radio crackled: “Permission to attack.”

The F-16s turned back east and within no time were over Shehada’s house. The navigator dropped the bomb and then—boom.

Shehada was instantly killed alongside his wife, Layla, their fifteen-year-old daughter, Iman, and another top Hamas operative. But the intelligence was faulty. A row of tin shacks nearby that the IDF had assumed were empty were actually packed that night with Palestinians who had fled a different area of Gaza within which the IDF was operating. In total, the targeted killing of one person—Shehada—resulted in the deaths of sixteen people, mostly women and children.

The world came crashing down on Israel. The United Kingdom’s foreign office said the attack was “unacceptable” and “counterproductive,” and Prime Minister Tony Blair’s official spokesman called for an end to the “cycle of violence which has scarred the region.”

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that Israel had “failed” its “legal and moral responsibility to avoid the loss of innocent life.… It clearly failed to do so in using a missile against an apartment building.”

And even President George W. Bush, who had been supportive of Israel’s operations to defend itself from Palestinian terror attacks, joined the condemnations, calling the attack “heavy-handed.”

That was on the world stage. Back home, the situation was worse. While most Israelis supported the IDF’s aggressive campaign to defeat Palestinian terrorism, a group of twenty-seven reservist pilots signed and published a letter saying they would not continue flying combat missions.

Sharon knew this was a blow too many. Reservists make up the bulk of the air force’s personnel, and if the pilots—considered the highest-quality soldiers in the military—were claiming they could no longer trust their commanders and the missions they were being sent on, Israel was in greater

trouble than he imagined. After all, pilots rely on their commanders to send them only on missions that meet the highest moral and ethical standards.

Facing fierce criticism, Sharon approved the establishment of a commission of inquiry to investigate the botched bombing. While some in the IDF were quick to point fingers at one another or at Shin Bet, the main failure—later confirmed by the commission—was the incomplete, unfocused, and inconsistent intelligence regarding the presence of civilians in the structures adjacent to the Shehada house where most of the civilians were killed.

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A year later, all of this was on Yaalon's and Dichter's minds, although this time the target was not just a single Hamas terrorist but the terrorist group's entire leadership. With one bomb, Israel could decapitate the entire organization. It could deal it a blow that would throw Hamas at minimum into a disarray from which it would take years to recover, and—as some officials predicted—it even had the potential to put a stop to Hamas completely.

But the botched Shehada killing weighed heavily on Israel's security chiefs. Yaalon was just a few weeks into the role of chief of staff when the strike was launched a year earlier. He was still dealing with the aftermath—a loss of trust between pilots and their commanders, war crimes charges brought against him personally in Europe, and an ongoing governmental commission of inquiry.

For him, the current conditions at Abu Ras's house did not pass what he called the "mirror test"—a review of operations that he created for himself. It was a simple test: if Yaalon could look in the mirror and say that what he was doing met the IDF's ethical and moral standards, then the mission could go ahead. If not, it couldn't.

A decision needed to be made though. The Hamas leaders were in the building, and the clock was ticking. IAF fighter jets were waiting on the runway, fueled and loaded with bombs and ready to attack. Israel had no way of knowing how much longer the meeting would take. It could be over within minutes.

Yaalon got the prime minister on the phone. “We can win this battle with a one-ton bomb, but it will include dozens of dead, women and children,” the chief of staff explained. “It is like winning a battle but losing the war. My recommendation is not to attack.”

Dichter, the Shin Bet chief, tried to push back, but Sharon wanted a unanimous decision by his security chiefs. “Come to me with a joint position,” he ordered them.

Dichter was not ready to give up. This was the chance of a lifetime—to deal a fatal blow to the deadliest terrorist organization that Israel had known, one that had sent dozens of its people to blow themselves up to kill Jews. It was a chance that might not come again, or as one participant explained, “It was something that happens once in a hundred years.”

By this point, the pair of F-16s had been given the green light to take off and were circling over the Mediterranean Sea off the Gaza coast, waiting for the order to attack. From the moment the order was given, the entire operation would be over within two minutes.

While Dichter was wracking his brain, thinking of how to still carry out the strike, a Shin Bet analyst raised a hand in the command center. The home, the analyst said, had three floors. “What if we are able to determine which floor they are sitting in?” he asked. The IAF strike assessment team did some calculations and concluded that if the operation was now limited in its scope to just striking either the second or third floor, then a quarter-ton bomb—250 kilograms—would suffice to kill everyone on the floor and would, just as importantly, have limited collateral damage.

The problem that remained was a tactical one: this kind of strike was only applicable against the second or third floor, both of which could be hit with a missile through the window, as opposed to a bomb dropped directly onto the building from the top, capsizing the entire structure.

Dichter ordered his team to try to determine the floor on which the meeting was taking place, and where exactly the men had gathered. Were they still on the first floor? Were they on the second floor, assuming it was best protected, or were they on the top floor, the one with the drawn curtains? While the closed curtains on the third floor offered a clue, how would Yassin, who was confined to a wheelchair, make it up there? Of course, it was possible that his assistants carried him, but would it not have been more convenient to simply hold the meeting on the bottom floor?

Dichter convened another conference call with Yaalon and some other senior defense officials. The drawn curtains, the larger windows, and the fact that the third floor was apparently where the family hosted most of its large gatherings made it seem like the perfect location for the meeting. “It wasn’t intelligence,” Dichter later explained. “It was a feeling based on the information that existed at the time.”

It was a simple decision. While the hope was that the intelligence analysis was right and the terrorists were meeting on the third floor, if they weren’t, and the group survived, each member would now know that he was a target for an Israeli killing. They would all likely go underground and change the way they lived, making future attacks even harder.

Yaalon and Dichter decided to go for it. They updated the prime minister, who accepted the recommendation and greenlighted the mission. Yaalon, who was still home, stayed on the secure line in his bedroom and listened as the planes moved in for the strike. Dichter and Ziv watched from a screen in the forward command post.

When the bomb struck the building, everyone held their breath. It was a direct hit, confirmed by the pilot and the live drone footage broadcasting directly to the command center. The IAF strike assessment team had been right—the entire third floor was blown apart. The problem was that the Shin Bet analysis of the floors had been completely wrong. Within seconds of the bomb striking the third floor, the front door to the building swung open.

“Everyone ran outside, each terrorist and each murderer,” Dichter recalled. “Someone even swore that he saw Sheikh Yassin run out on his own two feet.”

Haniyeh’s hand was slightly wounded, but otherwise all of the men who had gathered at the Abu Ras home just brushed off the dust and carried on with their day.

The mission was a complete failure. Israel had its top enemies in its sights, but because of sensitivity to the potential loss of civilian life and an intelligence gap, it missed the chance. The feeling was awful. “To this day, I cannot believe that we didn’t succeed in convincing the prime minister and Yaalon to use the bigger bomb,” Dichter told us two decades later. “This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and we blew it. They never met again like that. That is a fact.”

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It is hard not to imagine what might have happened if Israel had succeeded in eliminating the Hamas leaders years ago. Some of the men who had gathered in the Abu Ras home that day would indeed ultimately meet a premature death. Yassin would be killed in an Israeli airstrike within just a matter of months, al-Ghoul, the Qassam maker, would be killed a year later, and Jabari would be killed in 2012 in a drone strike that set off eight days of fighting between Israel and Hamas.

Haniyeh would go on to serve as Hamas's prime minister and head of its political arm, and he would travel—in the months after October 7—between Iran, Damascus, and Qatar, raising funds and weapons for Hamas's continued operations before being killed in an operation attributed to the Mossad in Tehran. Deif would continue to evade Israeli attempts to kill him—nine were believed to have been carried out over the years—until he, too, was finally killed in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza in the summer of 2024.

But as the failed Abu Ras mission showed, the war against Hamas was never simple. There were multiple factors to constantly consider—Israel's ties with the world, concern that international arrest warrants would be issued against IDF officers and government ministers for their involvement in controversial operations, internal Israeli politics, and much more.

Following October 7, Israel finally took the gloves off and went after each Hamas leader, creating special teams whose sole mission was eliminating a handful of targets, hunting and tracking them until they were finally located and killed.

But while the success rate was impressive, no one in Israel lived under an illusion that it would be enough. Targeted killings can weaken and undermine an enemy, but they cannot defeat it. For that to happen, a bigger strategic plan is needed, one that ends Hamas's grip over Gaza and prevents it from reconstituting its capabilities and its control over the Palestinian territory.

The question now is one that only time can answer—what will happen five years from now when there is once again quiet and Shin Bet or Mossad comes to the prime minister with the whereabouts of Hamas or Hezbollah leadership? Will Israel come to understand that these opportunities do not

repeat themselves and attack, or will the country prefer to hold back, contain the threat, and continue to enjoy a period of quiet?

If there is anything that best illustrates Israel's obsession with containment it is the Qatari money that Netanyahu and Bennett allowed into Gaza in an attempt to buy quiet—or, put another way, the way Israel paid blackmail to a terrorist group.

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6

Paying Terrorist Blackmail

In 2018, Israeli intelligence officials from a special unit called Harpoon landed a major breakthrough. The Israeli agents obtained a computer belonging to a top Hamas official, and on its hard drive they discovered a treasure trove of documents with lists of companies and assets, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. It seemed to be part of what was, until then, an unknown Hamas financial network that had one goal—to create revenue for the terrorist group's war against Israel.

Israel knew about Hamas's different sources of money. For one, Iran provided the terrorist group with tens of millions of dollars a year. But the discovery on the hard drive was something different. What the documents showed was Hamas's interest in creating its own independent funding stream. The whole scheme was set up like a financial institution—every company was listed with the relevant officers, the industry of its focus, and the revenue.

What shocked the Israelis was the diversity of the seemingly innocent-looking assets: there were chicken farms, mines, property in North Africa, construction projects, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, gold prospecting, and even a real estate company listed on the Borsa Istanbul, the Turkish stock exchange.

"It was a treasure trove of information that, if neutralized, had the potential to deal Hamas a blow just like a kinetic attack," explained one of the intelligence officials who reviewed the documents.

For weeks, analysts pored over the lists and identified the different assets, the shareholders, the controlling owners, and the investors. One of the members of the team created a map showing the breadth of investments Hamas had at its disposal. But when the team presented it to other members of the Israeli intelligence community, as well as to intelligence and Treasury officials in Washington, nothing happened. At the time, it was simply deemed unimportant.

According to the documents, Hamas had, from the early 2000s, accumulated some forty commercial companies based in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Algeria, and Sudan. The companies provided Hamas with a reliable way to conceal around $500 million in assets, with real estate serving as the group's strongest holding, since property usually retains its value and has the potential for steady rental income to finance ongoing activities.

Turkey was an obvious choice to base the companies and was already a haven for Hamas since 2010 when Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan decided to move his country away from being a close ally of and trading partner with Israel and become one of the Jewish state's harshest critics and adversaries.

Hamas officials regularly traveled to Turkey, and one of the group's top operatives, Saleh al-Arouri, established a base of operations there from which he orchestrated attacks against Israel over a number of years. Al-Arouri oversaw attacks against Israel from Istanbul until he was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Beirut in January 2024.

Harpoon agents understood Hamas's attraction to Turkey. The country's weak financial system enabled the terrorist group to hide its laundering activities and tax violations from international regulatory bodies.

One of the companies based in Turkey was called Trend Gyo and was listed on the Turkish stock exchange. It was a subsidiary of a Saudi company called Anda, which was owned by Hamas. According to media reports, the investment arm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints even bought shares in the company, not knowing that it was a shell company providing funding for terrorists.

Leading the scheme was Hamas member Ahmed Odeh, who was born in Jordan and received seed money from the Hamas leadership in Gaza to create the portfolio. Odeh, for example, was listed alongside other Hamas

operatives as partners in a Turkish construction company called Uzmanlar Co., which was established in 2001 and had another Hamas operative as its CEO.

Another figure mentioned in the documents was Hisham Yunis Ichiyeh Qafisheh, a Jordanian and Turkish citizen who served as the chairman of the board of IYS Yapi Co., a contracting company in Turkey and a subsidiary of Trend GYO. This company's CEO was also allegedly a Hamas operative.

Hamid Abdullah al-Ahmar, who stepped down as chairman of Trend in 2022 but remained head of the parent company, told a conference in Istanbul in January 2024 that the "Al-Aqsa Flood"—as the Hamas attack on October 7 was called—was "at its peak, a sweeping and roaring flood that will never stop before the occupation of beloved Palestine is defeated."

Another interesting discovery in the documents was how Hamas distinguished between the workers in the various companies, with some described as "operatives" and others as "facilitators."

It was believed that "operatives" referred to long-standing Hamas members, and "facilitators" to individuals who were not card-carrying members of Hamas but were routinely used in the foreign-investment scheme. Some, the Israeli agents believed, knew what they were doing, whereas others were unwitting accomplices.

But despite the extent and detail of the intelligence, no one was doing anything. Udi Levy, a Mossad veteran and head of the group of agents that was tasked with reviewing the material, went to brief Netanyahu on what his agents had discovered. He was certain that the prime minister would be swift to act. Breaking up the investment network, he told Netanyahu, had the chance to bankrupt and eventually dismantle Hamas. Netanyahu listened and asked a few questions, but he gave no directives. Levy came away with a feeling that Israel was in a "wait and see" period.

Israel was preoccupied, according to officials who served in government at the time. It was more focused on getting President Donald Trump to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear accord and imposing tougher sanctions on Iran than dealing with Hamas, which was viewed as more of a nuisance than a strategic threat. Iran was Netanyahu's top priority.

As time passed, Levy's men in Harpoon grew increasingly frustrated and decided to go a bit rogue. Some of the members designed and established an off-the-books website on which they posted dozens of the

documents with accompanying analysis. One of the former members of Harpoon was asked to anonymously post some of the documents on Facebook. The group's hope was that businesses and investors around the world would see the documents, study them, and subsequently decide to stop doing business with the assets that made up Hamas's secret portfolio.

In May 2022, the Americans finally paid attention. It was about a year after Guardian of the Walls, the last large-scale operation in Gaza, and Trump was no longer in office. The Biden administration decided to impose sanctions on the finance network discovered nearly five years earlier.

Calling the network "Hamas's Investment Office," the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control imposed sanctions on Odeh, head of the scheme, the Turkish-based company Trend, as well as an expansive network that included three Hamas financial facilitators and six companies. The Treasury Department said that while Hamas's Shura Council and Executive Committee exercised control and oversight over the group's international investment portfolio, the Investment Office was in charge of the day-to-day management of the investment portfolio.

"Hamas has generated vast sums of revenue through its secret investment portfolio while destabilizing Gaza, which is facing harsh living and economic conditions," Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg said in a May 24, 2022, press release. "Hamas maintains a violent agenda that harms both Israelis and Palestinians. The United States is committed to denying Hamas the ability to generate and move funds and to holding Hamas accountable for its role in promoting and carrying out violence in the region."

By the time the United States acted, Levy and the other members of Harpoon who had tried to push for something to be done after the documents surfaced in 2018 were no longer in their roles. Most of them had retired from government service or had moved on to other branches of the defense establishment. And while they were happy to see something finally moving, they knew it was too late. Israel had once again missed an unprecedented opportunity.

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Over the years, Israel's methods for waging war against Hamas and the other terrorist groups along its borders have varied. They have hit terrorists by missiles and arrested, indicted, convicted, and sent them to jail. They have also exiled them from Israel and the West Bank and sent them to Gaza or Lebanon.

Mossad got into the business of combatting the flow of money to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran in the early 2000s, and at the time, the code name given to the team involved was "Harpoon."

The mission was simple: follow the money; but Israel never went all the way, restraining its full potential to deal a fatal blow to Hamas.

The man who started the campaign was Meir Dagan, Mossad's famed director at the time. Dagan was a unique character, and today, years after he passed away, he is still spoken of as a legend. Most of his family had been killed in the Holocaust, and instead of going to college, he spent his post–high school years participating in covert operations deep behind enemy lines in places like the Gaza Strip, eventually establishing a commando unit whose members would disguise themselves as local Palestinians and hunt down terrorists.

In 2002, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon appointed Dagan head of Mossad and tasked him with shaking up the spy agency. Dagan, Sharon believed, was brave, creative, and didn't mind getting his hands dirty. On the contrary, getting his hands dirty was his modus operandi.

On taking charge, Dagan outlined two primary tasks: undermine and stop Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon, and weaken the terrorist groups—Hamas and Hezbollah—deployed along Israel's borders. "We are not being asked to make a best effort," he would tell his operatives, "but to get the mission done."

Dagan took that directive seriously, and it meant that missions were rarely considered too controversial. If it was doable and legal, Dagan was usually on board with it. He set up what would become the Harpoon unit and tasked its men and women to go after the money that was used to fund terrorist groups.

The name "Harpoon" was chosen by one of the members of the unit who had read *Moby-Dick* and was enamored of the story of the whale hunters who waited patiently until the right moment to launch their attack.

“If you could stop the flow of money, you could stop the attacks themselves,” was how one of the group’s former top operatives put it.

One of Dagan’s first recruits was Levy, a former officer with the IDF’s Signal Intelligence Unit 8200—the equivalent of the NSA—and later an intelligence officer in the Civil Administration, the Defense Ministry branch responsible for coordinating with the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Burly, bald, and tough looking, Levy was known to be whip-smart and had earned a reputation as an officer with a unique insight into Palestinian society who did not like following the regular chain of command.

Dagan had first heard of Levy in 1993, about twenty years before he would become head of Mossad. Dagan was head of the IDF’s Operations Directorate, at the time, and Levy’s name kept coming up for his work in exposing a group of charities and couriers that Hamas was using to smuggle millions of dollars into the West Bank. Levy, Dagan had heard, presented the findings to Shin Bet, but the agents there were not interested.

While Levy made his case that stopping the money would eventually stop the terrorists, the Shin Bet agents were focused only on the terrorists, the men or women carrying the guns and explosive devices. “We are not interested in associations, clinics, and schools,” Levy recalled one top Shin Bet official telling him at the time. “I want to thwart the terrorists.”

Dagan went to see Levy, then a young major, and asked if he would join him for a tour of the West Bank that he was giving the deputy chief of staff. Dagan wanted Levy to brief them both on the work he had done to uncover and disrupt the Hamas charities.

When Levy arrived at the meeting, the deputy chief of staff looked the junior officer up and down and said, “You are a young man, and I was a major general in the Southern Command. I think I know everything there is to know about Hamas. You have twenty minutes to convince me that you have something new to teach me.”

Levy jumped into his briefing, which ended up lasting three hours. By the end, the deputy chief of staff asked Levy to join him at the weekly intelligence meetings where he received updates from Shin Bet and Aman. Levy was not on the best of terms with Shin Bet over disagreements over the amount of money believed to be flowing to Hamas—Levy thought it

was in the tens and possibly hundreds of millions of dollars, while Shin Bet believed it was just a few million.

But the deputy chief of staff didn't care and brought Levy to his weekly meetings and eventually even to meet with the prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. When Dagan became the head of Mossad, Levy was one of his first calls.

"Do you want to join me and continue building on your vision?" Dagan asked his protege. Levy explained that he had recently received the rank of lieutenant colonel and was on his way to receiving a promotion as a full colonel. But there was something about Dagan that pulled him in—as well as the opportunity to deal the blow to Hamas that he knew could only be achieved through financial warfare. Levy said yes and took on a twofold job—he was Dagan's personal assistant, overseeing a long list of secret missions, and he also established the department that was tasked with fighting the terror money.

Another early recruit was Uzi Shaya, a talented Shin Bet security officer who had spent time running agents as well as overseeing organizational security with a focus on South America. Shaya was one of Shin Bet's best handlers, possessing a unique ability to convince people to do what was needed.

In 2004, after returning to Israel after a few years as the Shin Bet representative in Argentina, Shaya was recruited into Harpoon and got to work right away alongside Levy.

In the beginning, Harpoon had the backing of the entire government. Dagan was a powerful head of Mossad and had a direct line to the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, as well as his successor, Ehud Olmert. With Sharon's backing, the unit was given access to all government data, as well as carte blanche to reach out to all friendly governments across the globe for assistance in various operations.

In the beginning, the group's target was Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian Authority leader, and his money man, an elusive financer by the name of Mohammed Rashid. Israel was trying to fight back against a surge of Palestinian suicide and terrorist attacks during the Second Intifada, and it needed ways to undercut the terrorist groups' ability to keep filling their bank accounts. With the help of Mossad, the Harpoon members hunted down any details they could get about Arafat's accounts. One idea was to

gather information about the secret accounts and then leak it to the media to portray the aging Palestinian leader as corrupt and self-indulgent. Another idea was to try to seize the accounts and give the money away.

Similar methods were used to undercut funding to terrorist groups, and in the beginning the operations were not overly sophisticated. One obvious problem was the way Palestinian banks were allowed to operate unhindered in the West Bank and Gaza, receiving and moving money in and out of the Palestinian territories without regulation. Terrorist groups had accounts in different banks and would simply move cash between them, trying to cover up their trail. Harpoon would send the IDF into the West Bank to raid the banks and confiscate documents in the hope of deterring the bank directors from working with the terrorists. In other cases, the IDF, with legal approval, went in and simply confiscated piles of cash.

When that wasn't enough though, Levy and Shaya came up with more innovative ideas. During the Second Lebanon War in 2006, for example, the air force bombed two big containers in a Hezbollah-controlled part of Beirut known as Dahiyeh, destroying tens of millions of dollars in cash. In another case, in 2010, the air force fired a missile in front of a jeep that had just crossed into Gaza from Egypt with the aim of scaring the occupants into bolting. Once they did, an Apache fired another missile, destroying the vehicle and sending millions of burning dollars flying through the air.

While the attacks were successful, they were not enough. To raise the ante, the Harpoon team initiated a legal track—to see if there was a way to sue the banks for allowing terrorist money to flow through their institutions, thereby facilitating terrorist activity. One early example was a 2004 lawsuit brought by close to three hundred victims of Hamas terrorist attacks against the Arab Bank based in Jordan.

According to the plaintiffs, the bank provided "extensive and substantial material support" to Hamas and was in violation of the US Antiterrorism Act of 1990, which allowed victims of foreign terror organizations to pursue monetary compensation in a US court.

One of the examples that the lawyers presented in court was an account based in an Arab Bank branch in Beirut that was under the name of Osama Hamdan, a known Hamas spokesperson, who allegedly used the funds to support Hamas activities.

Other top Hamas members had accounts in the bank. Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was an Arab Bank customer, as was Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader who in 2024 was based in Qatar and whose account received hundreds of thousands of dollars in transfers between 2000 and 2004.

The argument made by lawyers for the victims was simple—by processing payments to and from the Hamas leaders as well as to the families of suicide bombers, the Arab Bank was enabling Hamas to carry out deadly suicide bombings against Israel. While the case went on for years, it eventually ended in an undisclosed settlement in 2015.

In other cases, Levy and Shaya would meet with bank directors around the world and try to convince them to close the suspected Hamas accounts on their own. Due to the sensitivity of operating in friendly countries like the United States or in Europe, the operatives would not reveal that they were members of Mossad. Instead, they identified themselves as officials from the "Counter-Terrorism Bureau" (CTB), even printing up business cards to give out as needed.

In one memorable meeting with a bank executive, Shaya printed up Levy's doctorate in Middle Eastern Studies from Bar-Ilan University and placed the stack of pages on the desk. "This is all the proof we have of what you've been up to," he said, pulling out the one real page with the number of an account they had identified and wanted closed. "I can give all these papers to US authorities, and they will shut down the whole bank, or you can work with us," he told the executive, who readily accepted the offer.

In another case, a foreign executive based overseas was running a financial services firm that was facilitating Hamas transfers. Harpoon tried speaking with him to stop the activity, but he refused. In the end, the agents cut his internet line and skillfully used cybertools to scare his clients. It worked, but only for a short time.

Not everything was a success, but the Harpoon members, noticing a drop in funding to Hamas, had a feeling that they were moving the needle, even if just a bit. That feeling of building momentum changed by the mid-2010s, when some members of the team began feeling that Netanyahu had lost interest in trying to empty Hamas's coffers. The case that made this clear involved the Bank of China and showed just how complex terror financing can be when it gets mixed up with geopolitics.

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The story began in the early 2000s when Shin Bet provided Harpoon with intelligence about Hamas accounts in the Bank of China, a Chinese state-owned bank and one of the largest financial institutions in the world. According to the intelligence, the money—tens of millions of dollars—had originated in Syria and Lebanon and was sent to the Bank of China's branch in Guangzhou. There, it was transferred to a private Palestinian businessman and alleged Hamas operative by the name of Said al-Shurafa, who would either send the cash directly to Gaza or buy merchandise outside Gaza and then ship it there. The merchandise would then be sold, and the money used by Hamas.

It was a scheme well known to the Palestinian Authority and the United States. In 2007, Jihad al-Wazir, the governor of the Palestinian Monetary Authority, explained to a group of US officials how the system worked: "Imported goods are paid for from accounts outside Gaza or even with cash at point of origin. The Gaza recipient pays cash, [and] the goods are sold to a Hamas-affiliated individual [who] deposits funds into a Hamas-controlled bank account. In addition, the value of imported goods is often understated, with the cash bonus derived from their sale going to Hamas."

Shin Bet began tracking al-Shurafa and discovered that his brother, a known Hamas operative, lived in an Arab country. The brother was arrested and a threat to al-Shurafa was passed on, but nothing changed. Al-Shurafa continued with his illicit activities—transferring more money via the Chinese account and using it to create cash for Hamas.

Using his credentials as an agent of the CTB, Shaya traveled to China for ten days, where he held several meetings with top government and financial officials, including representatives of the Chinese authority that combats money laundering. At first, Israel got the feeling that the Chinese might be willing to assist. They asked for more information on the specific account at the bank that was troubling Israel as well as for details about its purpose.

Shaya followed up with a couple of trips to try to push the issue and regularly passed on intelligence to the Chinese via the Mossad. On one of Shaya's trips, the Chinese convened a group of officials from the banking

industry, the government, and the money-laundering authority to receive a crash course in financial warfare.

For a time, it seemed to Harpoon that they might be making some headway with China, but after a few months, Shaya and Levy understood that Beijing was playing them. Al-Shurafa was continuing to operate and the money was flowing freely to Gaza. When pressed, the Chinese officials explained that Hamas was not a designated terrorist group in China and therefore there were no legal grounds for the government to freeze al-Shurafa's bank account.

April 2006 was a turning point. Daniel Wultz, a sixteen-year-old Jewish-American tourist visiting Israel from Weston, Florida, was killed along with ten other people in a suicide bombing at a shawarma restaurant near the Tel Aviv central bus station. Because Wultz was an American, Shaya and Levy realized that they could file a lawsuit against the Bank of China in the United States.

Government representatives met with Daniel's parents, Sheryl and Yekutiel, and encouraged them to sue, explaining that Israel would offer its full support by providing intelligence that could be submitted as evidence and even allowing officials involved in collecting the intelligence to testify in court as needed.

To advance the lawsuit, Harpoon brought in a retired Mossad agent, showed him the material, and had him sign an affidavit to validate the findings so that a name that was not classified could appear on court filings. Neither Shaya nor Levy—active agents—could reveal their names or identities in court documents. The lawsuit was filed, and the bank stopped the transfers almost immediately.

A few years passed, and in 2011 the case hit a bump in the road. The lawyers came to Shaya, now retired, and asked him to testify. At first, he refused. Despite no longer being in service, he needed permission from the director of Mossad, Tamir Pardo, Dagan's former deputy. Pardo was initially against allowing his former operative to go public, but then the Wultz family sent their relative Eric Cantor, a congressman from Virginia who served at the time as the House majority leader, to Netanyahu to plead their case.

Netanyahu called Pardo and Pardo called Shaya, telling him that the government had changed its mind and that it was now in Israel's interest for

him to testify. While the green light had been given, there were stipulations. Shaya was not allowed to appear in court, but he could testify via video conference from Israel while sitting behind a curtain. After receiving a document signed by the prime minister's national security adviser asking him to testify, Shaya agreed.

This was not the end of the saga. When the court was informed that Shaya was planning to testify, the Chinese understood that they were in trouble. Shaya was the person who brought them the intelligence on al-Shurafa back in 2005. There was no way they could claim they did not know about the problematic account. Chinese diplomats came to Jerusalem and protested, but then they did something smarter: they invited Netanyahu to China for a diplomatic visit with one condition—Shaya would have to cancel his testimony.

In May 2013, Netanyahu visited China. He met with President Xi Jinping in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, laid a wreath at the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square, toured the Great Wall, and even said that a fence his government had recently erected along the border with Egypt had been inspired by the ancient Chinese fortification.

Shaya was naturally concerned. The Wultz family was pushing him to testify, but now the government was telling him that he could not. At a meeting with one of Netanyahu's top aides, Shaya was told not to worry: "You are one of Israel's finest, and we will take care of this situation."

In November, Israel filed a motion in a Washington, DC, court to revoke the subpoena that Shaya had received, arguing that sovereign immunity needed to be upheld. The judge accepted the request.

While Shaya would have liked to testify to help dismantle what was clearly a key Hamas financing route, he learned at the time that Israel had other considerations. Stopping the funding of Hamas was not always going to be one of them.

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Over the years, Hamas has received funding from a variety of sources. Up until the mid-2000s, Saudi Arabia provided a sizable portion. But in 2005, it decided to stop the NGOs in its territory from sending money to Palestinian

terrorist groups. Additional funding has come from charities in the West, commercial activities, and individuals in Gulf states—primarily Kuwaitis and Qataris—who have channeled money through the UAE. This funding often enters the West Bank and Gaza through money changers and couriers.

A lot changed in 2007 when Hamas forced Fatah out and violently took over the Gaza Strip. It was able to impose taxes on Palestinian civilians and extort money from importers and exporters. Even workers allowed into Israel played a role in funding Hamas terrorist activities. These workers, earning an Israeli minimum wage salary—often ten times more than the average wage in Gaza—would be taxed at high rates and forced to pay a cut of their earnings to Hamas. Some estimates put the taxes at about $40 million of monthly income for Hamas.

Some of the money in Gaza comes—in a roundabout way—from Israel. While rough estimates put Hamas's annual budget at $2 billion, a large portion comes from the Palestinian Authority, which transfers about one-third of its total budget to Gaza to pay for government institutions, hospitals, and municipal authorities. The transfer of funds—some of which is collected by Israel on behalf of the PA—is done in an orderly manner through the Palestinian banking system, which is overseen by the Bank of Israel.

This special cover from the Bank of Israel is needed to protect banks from being blacklisted by the United States. The reason is that since they are transferring money to Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, a US-designated terrorist group, they are theoretically in violation of international counterterrorism regulations on financing. Israel's special approval provides those banks with legal protection to continue operating.

Countries don't usually help their enemies get paid. But Israel was trying to strike a delicate balance between weakening Hamas and lifting up the average Palestinian with a degree of economic prosperity. Consecutive governments in Jerusalem believed that improved conditions in Gaza would lessen Hamas's incentive to go to war against Israel.

The idea was simple—Israel was basically helping Hamas govern Gaza, and in exchange Hamas was supposed to provide some semblance of quiet and responsible leadership. While it sounded nice, it totally ignored the fact that Hamas was a genocidal terror organization, something that became awfully clear in 2014 in Operation Protective Edge, during which

Hamas fired close to five thousand rockets into Israel and terrorists infiltrated via cross-border attack tunnels. Netanyahu wanted to find a way to stop the cycle of violence that was forcing Israel into an armed conflict against Hamas almost every two years.

Shortly after the 2014 operation ended, Levy met with Netanyahu to present him with a new Harpoon plan that had the potential to deal a devastating blow to Iran and its proxies—Hezbollah and Hamas.

Levy met with the prime minister, who listened impassively. When the Harpoon agent pushed, Netanyahu hinted that he did not want wars to continue endlessly and that Israel needed to find a different way forward. Levy was disappointed and confused. When he left the prime minister's office, he went straight to Tamir Pardo's office and conveyed what had happened.

The Mossad director did not have a reasonable explanation. Clearly, Netanyahu was simply no longer interested in what Harpoon had to offer.

Levy was reminded of a story he had heard from his former commander, Dagan, the man who founded Harpoon. Dagan would tell people how he would almost always stop in the Arab village of Abu Ghosh just outside Jerusalem to eat hummus after meetings with Netanyahu at the prime minister's office. Netanyahu, Dagan said, frequently changed his mind regarding a decision and would call the Mossad chief back to his office.

"I didn't want to be too far away," Dagan would say with a smirk. "I was never wrong. He almost always called me back."

Knowing how challenging it could be to get approval for his plans, Levy would frequently bring senior figures from the Israeli banking system with him to help explain the missions and their chances of success. "I tried to explain how financial warfare is one of the greatest weapons with the potential to bring down countries or terrorist groups without a single person being killed," Levy recalled.

But Netanyahu pushed back. He did not believe these actions would bring down the enemy. Nor did he convey to Levy that he had fallen in love with a new plan that was supposed to buy quiet in Gaza in the most literal sense of the term.

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After the 2014 war in Gaza, Netanyahu was looking for a new way to break the cycle. Wars with Hamas were becoming regular occurrences, and the prime minister wanted to focus on what he believed was the greatest threat to Israel—Iran.

It was around this time that Qatar entered the picture, pledging more than $1 billion in aid to Gaza and becoming its biggest donor.

While tiny, Qatar has long played an outsized role in the Middle East. It is one of the wealthiest countries in the world thanks to its vast deposits of natural gas and oil, and over the years, it has used its cash to enhance its standing across the globe—from hosting the World Cup in 2022 to buying up the intellectual property at key American universities.

It has also had an up-and-down relationship, never formalized, with Israel. While Qatar was one of the first Gulf states to open a trade office in Israel following the Oslo Accords in 1993, it closed the office in late 2000 at the start of the Second Intifada and then cozied up to Iran despite being home to the Al Udeid Air Base, a US Central Command operations center and one of America's largest bases in the Middle East.

Two years earlier, in 2012, the Qatari emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, had become the first Arab leader to visit the Gaza Strip since Hamas's violent takeover five years earlier. Al Thani was greeted with a red carpet and walked hand in hand with Hamas leader Haniyeh through crowded Gaza streets.

The emir promised hundreds of millions of dollars to rebuild Gaza; as an example, he funded a whole new neighborhood in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis and named it after himself. Netanyahu and his national security adviser at the time, Yossi Cohen, identified what they believed was a unique opportunity: maybe they could stop the rounds of violence by making payments to Hamas, with some in the form of infrastructure investments and others as cash transfers for people in need.

Qatar had also used its banks over the years to send money to Hamas, and while Mossad knew this, they were directed not to touch the Qataris. "There were ties that dated back years between us," one former intelligence official explained. "The relationship had its ups and downs, but Israel never took action against Qatari money."

In early 2014, just a few months before the war in Gaza, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt withdrew their ambassadors

from Qatar, the first severance of relations of its kind since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The countries accused Qatar of interfering in their “internal affairs,” coded language for the emir’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Israel knew that Qatar wanted to regain favor within the moderate Arab world and with the West, and that more involvement in Gaza might be appealing to the emir as a way to play a role in de-escalation as opposed to the radicalization that he was being accused of. Cohen, Netanyahu’s national security adviser, was sent to Doha to make the pitch to the regime: increase your investment in Gaza, help the Palestinians build infrastructure, and in exchange assist Israel in achieving quiet.

Cohen flew to Qatar, met with top officials there, and received a green light. The emir was willing to provide regular funding to Hamas in Gaza. Israel also spoke with top officials in the Obama administration and in the United Nations, getting all of the relevant players on board for the new scheme.

While the money was first used to pay for fuel supplies that Gaza needed, in 2017 Israel proposed a new mechanism under which the Qatari government would send $30 million in cash every month to Gaza. Of that amount, $10 million would go to purchasing fuel from Israel to operate the Gaza power plant; $10 million would be used to pay government employees’ salaries; and another $10 million would go to monthly assistance for 100,000 needy families.

The families would receive $100 and sign a document acknowledging that they had received the money, copies of which were then provided to Israel, the United Nations, and Qatar. This was the “safeguard” to stop the money from being diverted to Hamas.

But that’s not how it worked. Officials now admit that, despite the documentation, they were naïve to think that they could control the destination of cash being transferred into Gaza and that, in reality, it was impossible to know if and what portion of those funds reached Hamas’s military wing. After October 7, Israeli defense officials speculated that the amount must have been substantial, even though the terrorist wing did have separate funding channels, including additional funds from Qatar.

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The man charged with overseeing the delivery of the money to Gaza was former Qatari diplomat Mohammed Al Emadi, who had made a personal fortune in real estate and was closely aligned with the royal family. Taking on the role of overseeing the reconstruction of Gaza, Al Emadi traveled frequently to the Strip, sometimes bringing suitcases full of cash with him to deliver to Hamas.

While he would describe his work as professional and apolitical, Al Emadi understood that to succeed in his work, he needed to cultivate strong ties with the IDF and Mossad, the organizations whose approval would be needed to facilitate the transfers.

Thus Al Emadi developed a close relationship with Major General Yoav Mordechai, a former IDF spokesperson who had become the coordinator of government activities in the territories and Israel's point person for all civilian coordination in Gaza and the West Bank. Al Emadi would fly into Amman, drive across the border into Israel, and then spend a few nights at the Ritz-Carlton in Herzliya or at the Waldorf Astoria in Jerusalem, a hotel he once described as "the best."

While the initial transfers were quiet, by 2018 Israel could not keep the Qatari involvement under wraps, especially after a leaked photo showing operatives bringing three large suitcases allegedly full of cash over the Erez crossing from Israel into the Hamas-controlled territory. It was a scene, one journalist described, out of a mafia movie.

Netanyahu stayed mum, as did the IDF, but insiders knew that there was no way the money could have been flowing to Gaza without the prime minister's personal approval. Around the same time, Netanyahu sent a letter to the emir of Qatar thanking him for his country's contribution to the relative quiet that had been achieved along the border with Gaza and urging the Arab ruler to continue allocating the money.

Once the money made it to Gaza, however, Israel was no longer able to oversee its distribution. The amount coming from Qatar was substantial, and no one was supervising its use. "Once it crossed into Gaza, we didn't have any control where the money went," one former official said. So what did the security agencies in Israel do? They turned a blind eye, preferring to look at the Qatari money as if it were support to a struggling political party called Hamas and not assistance to a terrorist organization that carried the same name.

“There were people who genuinely believed in the approach that money could buy quiet,” Levy, the former head of Harpoon, explained years later. “No one thought at the time that Qatar was doing the same as the Muslim Brotherhood when in reality that is exactly what was happening.”

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By 2016—two years after the Qataris began financially supporting Hamas—Levy found some success in turning Harpoon’s focus to other fronts, mainly Hezbollah and Iran. Working closely with the Obama administration, Israel pursued tough sanctions on Iran, part of what led eventually to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the controversial nuclear deal that the US secretary of state at the time, John Kerry, negotiated with Tehran.

On the Hezbollah front, Harpoon struck a strategic alliance with the Drug Enforcement Agency and got the Americans to recognize the Lebanese group not just as a terrorist organization but also as a criminal gang, responsible for drug production and proliferation.

Yossi Cohen became the head of Mossad in 2016. He was not interested in Harpoon and wanted to turn Mossad’s focus strictly to Iran. He also wanted to cultivate diplomatic ties with Arab countries, a desire that would culminate in normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco in 2020. Right around that time, Netanyahu appointed Avigdor Lieberman, one of his longtime political rivals, as Israel’s new defense minister. Cohen took advantage of the change at the top and convinced Lieberman to integrate Harpoon into the Defense Ministry.

With the move, however, Cohen divided up responsibility. Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups would be under the aegis of the ministry, while Iran and Hezbollah would remain under Mossad. Levy got the message and decided to step down. In a sign of the continued deterioration of Harpoon, the defense minister appointed a lawyer from the Justice Ministry, not someone who had climbed the ranks in the operational side of the intelligence community, to run the department.

“Harpoon lost the intelligence support, became weak, and had a low operational capability,” explained one of the unit’s former members. In the years since, officials have openly admitted that its focus has shifted to research and now has very little operational capability.

With Qatar now providing Hamas with most of its money—approximately $360 million a year—the Israeli intelligence agencies paid very little attention to the cash. Shin Bet, for example, said that it was responsible only for the Hamas “terrorist arm,” which meant that Qatari money or other funds that the Palestinian Authority transferred from Ramallah to Gaza were not under its purview. “That is political money,” officials said.

A Shin Bet presentation from 2022 told the entire story, showing a breakdown of Hamas money, how much of it came from Iran and Qatar, and how much the group made from its different sources of income, like tax collection. The Shin Bet chief would use the presentation to brief visiting officials from the United States.

The total showed in the presentation was $160 million and the breakdown was listed as about half coming from Iran and the other half from Qatar. The problem was that everyone knew the annual budget was far greater—from Qatar alone the amount was $360 million—and was likely far north of $1 billion.

So why make a presentation like this? Former Shin Bet officials said that it was done because the security agency wanted to minimize the scope of its responsibility. Hamas was a large organization that included government, welfare, and military activities. The lower budget was meant to limit what Shin Bet would potentially have to deal with. In other words, it looked only at obvious military activities—cross-border tunnels, yes; regular tunnels, no.

The report also ignored cryptocurrency, another source of funds for Hamas. A *Wall Street Journal* article published a few days after October 7 cited reports by two cryptocurrency analytics firms and the Israeli government showing that cryptocurrency wallets connected to Hamas had received about $41 million between 2020 and 2023. Wallets connected to Islamic Jihad, another Gaza-based terrorist group, received as much as $93 million over the same period. In May 2023, just five months before the October 7 incursion, Israel seized 189 cryptocurrency accounts on the

Binance site—the world's largest bitcoin exchange—linked to the two groups.

Hamas's interest in cryptocurrencies was obvious—crypto provides a high degree of anonymity, making it attractive for financing criminal activity and terrorism.

When it came to Qatar, though, Israel did very little. One former Mossad official explained that even illicit funds that Qatar transferred to Hamas above the monthly aid were considered off-limits for any Harpoon operations.

"There were sensitivities with the Qataris over the ties we had with them, and the Americans also didn't want us doing anything there and told us, whenever we raised the issue, that they would solve it," the official explained.

In a 2020 letter to the "respectable state of Qatar," Cohen wrote: "It is my honor to address you and the Qatari people with greetings on the occasion of the Independence Day of the State of Qatar. This is a good opportunity to convey our gratitude and appreciation for the humanitarian aid that the State of Qatar has been providing to the Gaza Strip over the past few years. This aid has undoubtedly played a fundamental role in the continuous improvement of the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, and in ensuring stability and security in the region."

After October 7, Cohen explained the strategy to allow the Qatari funding of Gaza: "It was part of our clandestine effort … to achieve that same national goal of facilitating proper civilian life in the Gaza Strip. I must point out that there are similar phenomena in many other parts of the world that are dealing with opposition. Wherever the population lives under oppression and poverty, you say, let's increase their well-being so that they have something to lose."

In another letter to the Qatari foreign minister from 2021, Ronen Levy—who at the time headed the National Security Council's Middle East, Africa, and Special Liaisons Directorate—thanked Doha for its financial support of the civilian population in Gaza.

"We reiterate the importance of continuing to transfer the Qatari humanitarian financial assistance through the existing mechanism, i.e., the ambassador [Mohammad] al-Emadi [head of] the Qatar Committee for the

Reconstruction of Gaza, in order to maintain the aforementioned … achievements."

The money from Qatar became an important component of Israel's defense policy vis-à-vis Gaza. In 2021, when Naftali Bennett, the right-wing politician and former head of a pro-settlement NGO, became prime minister, he vowed to stop Al Emadi and his suitcases of cash.

"We are working on a solution that will allow humanitarian assistance to the residents of Gaza, but without suitcases full of dollars," Bennett said at one of his first cabinet meetings upon assuming the role of prime minister.

A few days later, at a meeting in his office with top members of his staff, Bennett was presented with an alternative plan for how the money would enter Gaza. One of his top aides explained that they could deposit the money directly in Gazans' bank accounts instead of letting Hamas authorities distribute one hundred dollars in cash to each welfare family vetted by Israel.

At the table was Bennett's spokesperson, the youngest member of the team in his mid-twenties. The spokesperson had done his compulsory military service in the office of the Coordinator of the Government Activities in the Territories, and his focus had been humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip.

"There is no debit card system in the Gaza Strip," he told the group, which included the national security adviser, the prime minister's military aide, and his foreign policy adviser. None of these officials were aware of this key detail.

Bennett became visibly upset. He had just publicly vowed that cash would no longer enter Gaza. He couldn't walk that back without becoming a laughingstock of the Right, which was trying to topple his shaky new coalition. So instead, the government came up with an elaborate plan: Qatar would deposit the funds each month in a United Nations bank account in New York. From there, the money would be transferred to a Palestinian bank in Ramallah, and from there to a branch in the Gaza Strip. The Gaza branch would then issue reloadable debit cards with one-hundred-dollar stipends, which were then distributed to the preapproved families.

While the plan allowed Bennett to stand by his promise not to send suitcases of cash into Gaza, the result simply continued Israel's previous

policy of allowing tens of millions of dollars each month to enter into a territory controlled by a violent and brutal terrorist organization. While the debit cards were supposed to go to specific families, Israel had no way of really knowing who was the final recipient of the cash.

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It would take the attacks on October 7 for Israel to recognize its mistake and understand that cash payments to terrorist groups do not buy quiet. After the Hamas attack against Israel and the discovery of Gaza's extensive tunnel network, as well as the unprecedented amount of weaponry, the mere thought that these financial payment schemes could ever have worked seemed ludicrous.

Cohen, who managed Israel's relations with Qatar during his years as head of Mossad, had already begun having second thoughts about Qatar in his last year in office, and after stepping down in 2021, he publicly admitted that the situation had gotten "out of control."

But Israeli policy vis-à-vis Qatar didn't change, and as seen in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks, Israel remained highly dependent on Qatar—not just to achieve quiet in Gaza but also to help negotiate a deal in which Israel could get back the hostages.

The Qataris had made themselves indispensable. The Al Thani royal family could harbor Hamas leaders in Doha, fund and use Al Jazeera to incite violence against Israel and embolden Hamas, and still work with Israel, even being hailed as an important ally by the United States. Creating a clear position on how to view Qatar after the October 7 massacre was still a challenge for Israel and showed how even after the greatest massacre of Jews on a single day since the Holocaust—nothing was simple.

However, a deeper question arose: What was Netanyahu thinking when he agreed to facilitate money transfers that seemed to contradict everything he once stood for when he resumed office in 2009? Back then, Israel had just concluded a three-week military operation against Hamas but had stopped short of dismantling the group's control over Gaza—a move Netanyahu had vowed to correct.

"The only way to remove this threat is to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza," he said at the time. "The government stopped the IDF before it was

able to finish the job. I want to be very clear: We will not stop the IDF. We will topple Hamas's terror regime, and we will restore security to the residents of Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Sderot, and to all of Israel."

Yet that never happened. Over the years, Netanyahu presided over four major operations, but none aimed at eliminating Hamas. Wouldn't doing so have significantly reduced the chance of a massacre like the one on October 7?

The answer is that, for Netanyahu, Hamas was a threat, but it was also something of an answer and a solution. Its existence and control over Gaza provided him with a constant excuse for explaining why it was impossible to advance toward a two-state solution, by which an independent Palestinian state would rule over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. If Hamas was in charge of half of the territory of a future state, he would explain to people, then what Palestinian state are we even talking about?

Netanyahu embraced this "separation" policy to the extent that Hamas became something of an Israeli asset. The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, on the other hand, was maligned and delegitimized even as its ruler, Mahmoud Abbas, consistently denounced terrorism. Yes, Abbas exhibited severe and fundamental flaws that Netanyahu regularly highlighted, but was he not better than Hamas? And if so, why did Israel not attempt to work with him?

The Qatari financial aid to Gaza helped maintain this separation. In 2019, Netanyahu explained this thinking: "Whoever is against a Palestinian state should be for" transferring Qatari funds to Gaza, he said, explaining that the establishment of a Palestinian state could be prevented by maintaining a separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

Far-right politician Bezalel Smotrich, who served as Israel's finance minister on October 7, articulated this strategy back in 2015 in a tweet: "The Palestinian Authority is a burden, and Hamas is an asset," he said, explaining that since Hamas was a clear terrorist group, no one would push Israel to engage with it in diplomatic negotiations. The PA, on the other hand, worked with the rest of the world, which pushed Israel to negotiate with it.

This separation was evident in the way that money was transferred to Gaza but was constantly being held up in being delivered to the PA in the

West Bank. While Israel was allowing suitcases of cash into Gaza, it was working with congresspeople and senators in Washington to pass the Taylor Force Act, a bill that stops American economic aid to the PA until it stops paying stipends to jailed Palestinian terrorists as well as to the families of deceased terrorists.

Israel then passed its own law to match the American one, which, while legitimate—the PA should not be allowed to pay salaries to terrorists—underscored the government in Jerusalem's upside-down approach to the Palestinians. Yes, the PA paid salaries to terrorists, but it was officially against terrorism and even worked in coordination with the IDF to break up Hamas and Islamic Jihad infrastructure and cells in the West Bank. Nevertheless, money to the PA was stopped. At the same time, Hamas—a jihadi terrorist group actively bent on Israel's destruction—was provided suitcases of cash.

In a way, Netanyahu's strategy succeeded. The establishment of a Palestinian state never materialized, and Hamas's grip on Gaza provided a convenient excuse for why such a state was neither possible nor desirable.

But as the fallout from October 7 expanded, Israel could no longer afford the luxury of delay or denial. The time had come to confront the true face of Hamas, not in the shadows of diplomacy but on the battlefield of Gaza—a fight that would reshape the region and test the limits of Israel's military might.

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CONCLUSION

Preventing Another October 7

On the evening of April 13, 2024, an unprecedented volley of destruction was unleashed at Israel. At 8 P.M., over one hundred drones took flight from Iran on their way to Israel, followed by a wave of cruise missiles two hours later, and then one hundred ballistic missiles that blasted into the sky a few hours after that. In total, 350 projectiles—drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles—were meticulously timed to strike at once in the heart of Israel. Several months later, in October, Iran attacked Israel again, this time with close to two hundred ballistic missiles, dozens of which struck inside and nearby air force bases.

On both nights, we found ourselves in the cold embrace of bomb shelters. Yaakov, in Jerusalem, listened as drones and missiles soared overhead, intercepted on their deadly journey to the south. Amir, from his home in the Negev, felt the ground shake as missiles targeted a strategic Israeli air force base not too far away. This was not just another skirmish; while Iran and Israel had long engaged in a covert war, these were the first two direct attacks by Iran since the Islamic revolution of 1979.

It was a new era of warfare in the Middle East.

The implications of these attacks were profound. Despite the combined efforts of Israel, the United States, France, and Britain to intercept most of the missiles and drones, the very act of direct aggression by Iran shattered longstanding conventions. Traditionally, Iran operated from the shadows, using proxies like Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, a Yemeni group, to wage its battles. This strategy afforded Iran plausible deniability, diverted

retaliation away from its sovereign territory and toward its proxies, and allowed the ayatollahs to exert their influence far from their borders.

But the direct attacks against Israel unmasked a new and uninhibited Iran. It showed how a fight with one proxy was like fighting against the entire Iranian axis in the region. The ring of fire around Israel had grown to monstrous proportions.

Clearly the country's ability to deter its adversaries had eroded. Israel's enemies felt they had an opening and were now emboldened by Iran's direct attacks, which—had they succeeded in striking multiple strategic targets throughout the country—could have delivered a crushing blow to the IDF and the very fabric of the state. It was a situation that Israel could not leave unchecked.

For decades, the IDF had been celebrated for its innovative spirit and ability to improvise and adapt. These qualities have always defined the Israeli army, driving it through the most challenging of circumstances.

In 1948, as the fledgling state fought for survival, waves of new immigrants arrived on its shores. Many of them knew no Hebrew, and even fewer knew how to handle a gun. Yet they made their way to the front lines, driven by the Zionist dream to establish a homeland for the Jewish people. It was a dream that resonated deeply with US president Joe Biden, who repeatedly affirmed during the war that while he might be a non-Jew and the president of the United States, he was a Zionist.

The events of October 7 once again laid bare Israel's sense of vulnerability. The nation was caught off guard and was gripped by a profound sense of helplessness, but amid the chaos, a few brave fighters showed that they still had the spark in their eye. Despite the failures, the courage and conviction of Israel's soldiers did not dim. Stories of heroism have not stopped surfacing since October 7. Just one example: Second Lieutenant Avichail Reuven's family immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. On October 7, he pulled his wet uniform from the washing machine, grabbed his weapon, and ran eight miles to the Gaza border to fight and save civilians. His courage was a testament to the unbroken spirit, since 1948, of Israel's defenders.

This new reality demanded an urgent response from Israel's leadership. The defense establishment had to restore the nation's capacity for deterrence, its ability to strike back with precision and ingenuity. It needed

intelligence that would not only counter the threats but also inspire fear and surprise even in the most dangerous of enemies.

Part of the way this was achieved was with a series of meticulously executed operations. On January 2, 2024, using a targeted strike in the heart of Beirut, Israel eliminated Saleh al-Arouri, the mastermind behind Hamas's military operations in the West Bank. Two months later, Marwan Issa, a key figure in constructing Hamas's intricate tunnel network in Gaza, was killed in a similar way. The following month, in Damascus, Israel struck again, eliminating Iranian general Mohammad Zahedi, the commander of the Quds Force in Syria.

But it was the next six operations that truly signaled Israel's resurgence. Israeli forces finally eliminated Mohammed Deif, the elusive commander of Hamas's military wing, after years of evasion, thanks to a critical piece of intelligence from Shin Bet. Fuad Shukr, Hezbollah's military commander, was next, eliminated in a pinpoint air operation in Beirut on July 30, 2024. And then, in a bold move that captured the world's attention, Mossad agents reportedly struck the next day in the heart of Tehran. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's political leader, was killed in a dramatic explosion at a Revolutionary Guards guesthouse, where he had been staying to attend the inauguration of Iran's new president.

In September 2024, Israel turned its attention to Hezbollah in Lebanon. First was the remarkable pager and walkie-talkie attack attributed to Mossad that saw thousands of devices held by Hezbollah operatives explode, killing dozens and wounding thousands. Next was the elimination of Hassan Nasrallah, the group's longtime leader, quickly followed by a series of strikes against his successor and that person's intended successor. And then, in October 2024, soldiers on a patrol in Gaza spotted two armed Palestinians moving through an unauthorized area. One of them took cover in a partially demolished home where he was eventually killed. The next morning, when the troops went into the house to take a closer look, they were shocked to see that it was the body of Sinwar, the sadistic leader of Hamas.

The audacity and precision of these operations left the world in awe of Israel's intelligence capabilities. They were not just a series of victories but a message to Israel's enemies that the nation's spirit, embodied in its soldiers and intelligence operatives, was far from broken.

And while Israel had eliminated targets in Tehran, Damascus, and Beirut before, this time the Iranians vowed a response. For weeks—in April and in September 2024—Israelis waited for Iran's retaliation. International airlines canceled flights to Israel, and the United States dispatched an unprecedented armada of aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and destroyers—all backed by advanced fighter jet squadrons—to try to deter the Iranians from attacking.

To Israel, the war showed once again how all of its enemies are connected. Haniyeh might have been a Palestinian who happened to be killed in Iran, and Nasrallah might have been a Lebanese killed in Beirut, but in the post–October 7 reality, Israel faces a united front where a fight with one of its enemies will risk initiating war with the others as well.

Such an era demands perpetual vigilance and readiness from the IDF and Israeli intelligence services. This is the future narrative of Israel—a tale of relentless defense and a constant struggle for survival.

Which is why Israel needs to make sure that what happened on October 7 does not happen again. Israel cannot afford to be caught in another long war that drains its military and its economy. Another disaster of this scale and scope will undermine confidence in Israel's legitimacy, already shaken by the toll of Hamas's attack.

We decided to end the book with some concrete recommendations on five issues that we believe are critical for Israel's security. They will, on the one hand, help prevent similar attacks from taking place, and on the other hand, they will assist Israel in prosecuting a war more effectively if its enemies force one upon it.

Reform Intelligence

The findings from the IDF General Staff's investigations into the historic October 7 intelligence failure are as agonizing as they are undeniable. Aharon Haliva, head of Aman, captured this sentiment during his retirement ceremony. Flanked by Herzi Halevi, the chief of staff, and his successor, Major General Shlomi Binder, Haliva said: "On that fateful Shabbat we failed in our most crucial mission—to provide a warning of war. The ultimate responsibility for this failure rests on me."

The most glaring example of this intelligence lapse was the inability to detect Hamas's preparations. How is it that by 6:29 A.M., Israel did not have

a single agent in Gaza who could warn of what was coming? How could it be that not a single officer called the Southern Command or the chief of staff, sounding the alarm that within hours, thousands of Hamas fighters would invade Israel?

Despite enormous investments in intelligence infrastructure, and some of the finest minds in Israel at the helm, the system failed at the most critical moment—the one it was created to prevent. Years of intelligence collection and the investment in technology capabilities amounted to nothing as the horrors unfolded—children, parents, and Holocaust survivors massacred in cold blood.

In the early days of the war, intelligence leaders wrestled with the questions: What led to this colossal failure? What could have been done differently?

Beyond the humiliation that Hamas inflicted on what was considered the Middle East's most powerful military, the terrorist organization achieved something equally profound—it managed to outmaneuver Israel's intelligence community. Hamas prevented analysts from recognizing that the mountain of information gathered over the years, and especially in the forty-eight hours before the attack, pointed not to a ceasefire, as they believed, but to a devastating conflict.

The intelligence community's missteps were not new—they began in the 1990s but peaked in 2006 with the abduction of Gilad Shalit from the southern Gaza Strip. Israel was unprepared then, too, and a fierce debate broke out between the IDF and Shin Bet over the accuracy of the intelligence that Shin Bet had provided, an argument that only grew during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 as both organizations grappled with the threat posed by Hamas's attack tunnels from Gaza.

Despite attempts at collaboration that followed and the efforts to project harmony between Shin Bet and Military Intelligence, this very closeness may have been the critical mistake. Could it be that a more defined tension, a healthy professional competition, would have driven the branches of the intelligence community to question one another more vigorously to provide the necessary warnings? This is something worth considering in the wake of October 7.

Including Mossad in intelligence operations against Hamas would also promote positive change. Mossad has a unique edge in dealing with

Hamas's global operations outside of Gaza. Its expertise could have been helpful in understanding what Hamas was planning on October 7.

Additionally, Israel's intelligence community became overly enamored with technology, and as a result, it neglected human intelligence (HUMINT). Although it was true, after all, that Military Intelligence's sophisticated AI system alerted the defense establishment on the night of October 6, this technological marvel did not prove to be enough to get the military command to take precautionary measures. What was lacking was robust human intelligence—boots on the ground—inside Gaza.

Military Intelligence and Shin Bet became overly reliant on cyber intelligence and signal intercepts, creating an imbalance between these methods and human intelligence. Indeed, numerous officers even questioned the need to maintain difficult-to-manage human agents, especially when technology provided such access to the thinking among Hamas's leaders.

Aman shared its data—both raw and processed—with Shin Bet and Mossad via a broad information channel. And while such cooperation is certainly needed, it fostered a sense of security and confidence between the agencies, giving each the feeling that the others were also watching.

When intelligence officers read intelligence reports on Hamas commanders, they felt they had a firm grasp on what was happening, which made them less inclined to challenge the prevailing assumptions that guided the defense establishment and political leadership. But even if someone—like the veteran analyst from Unit 8200—did question the prevailing conceptions, those insights were dismissed as far-fetched. Instead of probing deeper, commanders often brushed off the warnings, missing red flags that might have changed everything.

Such situations were exacerbated by the bureaucratic processes within the intelligence community. Oversight was needed not just for the data itself but also for the methods used to collect and analyze it. Was there a bottleneck that delayed critical information? Did someone miss a crucial detail in the sorting process? How can Israel ensure a smoother flow of relevant information? Intelligence officers were horrified when they later discovered the quality and extent of the information that never reached decision-makers.

As we described earlier in the book, a number of years ago, Aman shut down the southern branch of Unit 504, responsible for operating agents behind enemy lines, leaving the IDF without a single significant and effective agent in Gaza.

Shin Bet also scaled back its efforts to recruit human sources following the IDF's withdrawal from Gaza in the summer of 2005, reducing also the number of interrogators in the southern sector due to a lack of detainees.

In response to the initial findings of the war following October 7, Unit 504's southern branch was reestablished, and Shin Bet began recruiting agents anew, with Shin Bet commanders walking the streets of Gaza, Khan Younis, and Rafah for the first time in nearly two decades.

Another recommendation worth considering is for Israel to establish an independent external oversight body with the authority to review the intelligence community's collection, research, and assessment processes, basically everything that did not work in the run-up to October 7.

Aman's "Devil's Advocate Unit," a small department whose job is to play the contrarian and constantly challenge and question the conventional wisdom within the agency, was established after the Yom Kippur War and was supposed to prevent such blind spots and raise red flags. Yet, it failed to prompt the defense establishment to reconsider its assumptions. Something new is needed.

An additional recommendation is for Aman to invest more in open-source intelligence (OSINT). Hamas published a lot of what it planned to do—releasing videos of drills that simulated raids on IDF bases and border kibbutzim. Nevertheless, a few years ago, Aman shut down Hatzav, its OSINT unit.

Hatzav had been around for decades and collected intelligence from newspapers, radio programs, television channels, and, in its later years, the internet and social media.

Classified intelligence will always have an advantage over publicly available or leaked information, but OSINT has the potential to help complete the picture. The information Palestinians posted on social media on October 7, and the days after, greatly assisted Israel's intelligence community in building a picture regarding the fate of the hostages and the extent of the infiltration into Israel.

In the months after the war broke out, for example, intelligence agencies extracted valuable information from social media groups belonging to cities, towns, villages, and clans in Gaza.

Lastly, it is worth considering requiring every IDF regional command to collect its own independent intelligence and conduct its own analysis to assist in the efforts of the IDF General Staff. This would give more weight to soldiers like *tatzpitaniyot*, the female observers who were stationed along the Gaza border on October 7. They had warned that something was happening along the border, but their warnings were dismissed. That has to change.

Intelligence work requires a high degree of humility, especially when dealing with a foreign culture and an extremist fundamentalist terrorist organization that bases its ideology and decision-making on religion. The geographical proximity of Israel to Gaza blurred the alertness of those involved in collecting intelligence, especially as Israel's political leaders repeatedly warned that the real threat to the country was from Iran.

As we have shown throughout the book, the failures that led to October 7 were systemic. Israel's intelligence community did not have enough plurality or diversity of opinion. Once the top commanders of the agencies believed something, everyone was expected to simply fall in line. To prevent this from happening in the future, Israel can take a lesson from the United States, where in 2004, the 9/11 Commission—set up to probe the al-Qaeda attacks on September 11—proposed sweeping changes to the US intelligence community, including the creation of a new role, the director of national intelligence (DNI).

The role was not just another bureaucratic title; it was envisioned as a linchpin of American security, created to coordinate between the seventeen different American intelligence agencies and to implement a holistic vision for how the intelligence community needed to operate. With cabinet-level authority and access, the DNI has a great deal of influence over the president and US policy when it comes to matters of intelligence and national security.

One structural problem for Israel that the Americans did not face is that Aman is under the control of Israel's defense minister, whereas Mossad and Shin Bet fall under the authority of the prime minister. While the intelligence chiefs are meant to meet regularly to coordinate operations as

well as intelligence analysis, there is not one clear boss who exists with singular oversight to ensure that everything is coordinated. Competition is healthy, but coordination is critical.

An Israeli civilian DNI who oversees all the intelligence agencies and provides critical oversight would have the ability to challenge misconceptions that create strategic blindness like that which led to October 7. An Israeli DNI can coordinate between the agencies, ensuring that each complements the others and that all work holistically and not as competitors.

In addition, both the government and the IDF wash their hands of responsibility and blame the other. The government ministers pin the blame for the failures of October 7 on the IDF, and the IDF counters by saying that all it did was follow the directives it received from the prime minister.

Everyone failed in the run-up to October 7. But it is the government's job to supervise the military.

While the IDF needs to get used to this idea—due to the military's elevated standing in Israeli society, it will not be easy to accept stronger civilian oversight—the political echelon also needs to take its job more seriously. Currently, the two civilian authorities with real power are the security cabinet and the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. While the IDF is obligated by law to report to and appear before these bodies, the military's control over intelligence and live data collected in the battlefield makes it hard for the ministers and the Knesset members to understand situations quickly and fully enough to effectively do their job.

They need the IDF to give them access to information, because if they do not have it, they cannot even begin asking the questions that are required of responsible authorities.

And then, of course, there is the way Netanyahu has managed this relationship over the years. For him, the security cabinet often serves as a mere organizational formality. He prefers to convene smaller, more exclusive cadres where he crafts decisions before presenting them as faits accomplis to the broader assembly of ministers. At the onset of the post–October 7 war, the so-called War Cabinet included Benny Gantz and his party ally, Gadi Eisenkot. However, following their departure from the government in June 2024, Netanyahu formed a more intimate circle,

composed solely of himself and two trusted Likud ministers, Ron Dermer and Yoav Gallant, until he was fired in November 2024.

The mechanics of decision-making within his government remain opaque, but one constant that we have seen throughout Netanyahu's lengthy tenure has been the significant influence of politics on everything.

His fear that members of his coalition might abandon the government caused him to delay decisions that could have expedited a hostage deal and ceasefire. Time and again, throughout the conflict, Netanyahu placed political survival above national interest, allowing the war to extend unnecessarily. This, too, must change.

One final crucial point: for decades, Israeli society has criticized the lack of diversity within the ranks of Aman. Despite being a branch of a "people's army," these units failed to adequately represent the full spectrum of Israel's diverse social landscape, drafting more teenagers from upper-class homes in the center of the country than from lower socioeconomic families on the periphery.

Like the rest of the IDF, Aman must deepen this process to foster a true diversity of thought within its ranks. Different backgrounds come with different perspectives, which are always needed in the intelligence world.

To understand though what was really missed by Israeli intelligence, it is worth reading the final part of the resignation speech that Haliva, the head of Aman on October 7, gave when stepping down in August 2024.

"Always cast doubt. Never forget that we do not know everything. Recognize the inherent limitations of intelligence, its partial nature, and its limited ability to fully describe reality. Understand the fragility and fleeting nature of intelligence. Foster debates and disagreements. Continuously seek out another opinion, another explanation, and another possibility—these are the key tools at your disposal in the pursuit of the truth. Acknowledge the complexity of the intelligence profession, its limitation, and its critical importance. And above all—remember that, in the end, everything hinges on the people."

Bolster the US-Israel Alliance

There are three pivotal moments in Israel's history that can be credited with boosting its defense industry.

The first was the embargo that French president Charles de Gaulle imposed on Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967, ending an almost twenty-year alliance during which France supplied Israel with all of its advanced weaponry, from missiles to fighter jets and even a nuclear reactor.

Because of de Gaulle's embargo Israel was able to strengthen its military alliance with the United States. While the Kennedy administration had agreed to sell Israel the Hawk missile only five years earlier—the first significant American arms deal with the Jewish state—with France out of the picture, America was able to step into the void. Israel also began to invest in its own R&D infrastructure and create companies and laboratories that could develop and manufacture its own weapon systems. Without French missiles, avionics, and aircraft, Israel had to find other ways to obtain these.

The second pivotal moment was the decision in 1987 to cancel the Lavi, the ambitious aircraft project that Israel had undertaken five years earlier and had cost over a billion dollars. While the Lavi cancellation was a massive blow for Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), which had to lay off hundreds of engineers, work on this combat jet provided Israel with institutional knowledge that it was able to apply to the country's other burgeoning projects: satellites, missile defense systems, and drones. The talent that had been focused on a single aircraft suddenly spread like wildfire throughout Israel's defense and high-tech industries.

The third pivotal moment was the mass migration of around one million people to Israel from the former Soviet Union that began in the late 1980s. This influx of experts in aeronautics—physicists and engineers—was a massive boost to the Israeli defense sector, giving companies like IAI, Rafael, Elbit, and others a new pool of talent that could upgrade their product lines.

Altogether, these three milestones in Israeli history helped position the Jewish state as one of the world's leading weapons manufacturers and arms exporters, reaching, in 2023, more than $13 billion in sales.

Still, there is no question today that Israel is heavily dependent on the United States. When the war broke out in Gaza following the October 7 attacks, certain countries called on Israel to show restraint in its response, and later even announced arms embargoes on Israel. However, one senior

government official explained that it all did not really matter: “In the end, if we have America, we are fine.”

The reason is simple. While Israel would have preferred that the German and British prime ministers had continued to support the IDF offensive in Gaza, neither of them provides Israel with $3.8 billion in annual military aid or has passed a resolution in their parliament—as one has in Congress—to provide another $14 billion after October 7. Neither of these allies dispatched aircraft carriers to the eastern Mediterranean or the Persian Gulf immediately after the Hamas invasion to deter Iran and Hezbollah from attacking.

As important as other allies of Israel are, none of them are what America is to Israel, and there is no better place than the skies to bear witness to this bond. The Israeli air force is equipped almost entirely with American-made aircraft, from the sleek and stealthy F-35 to the formidable F-15 and F-16 fighters, the dependable C-130 transport planes, the lethal Apache attack helicopters, and the versatile Black Hawks.

Even the Gulfstream G550 jets, modified for intelligence gathering, hail from the United States. This reliance on American technology underscores a critical point: Israel’s ability to defend its airspace and project power relies heavily on continued American support.

Consider, for a moment, what the implications would be if the United States decided to halt the delivery of spare parts to Israel during a conflict. Could the Israeli air force continue its operations? Could it defend the nation against threats or maintain its offensive against terrorist groups like Hamas in the Gaza Strip or Hezbollah in Lebanon? Would it be able to project power to places even farther away like Yemen or Iran?

The stark reality is that without a steady supply of spare parts for planes, no air force can function effectively over time. Wartime conditions and sustained combat operations exacerbate this dependency, as the accelerated wear and tear on equipment increases the need for the steady supply of spare parts. This doesn’t even touch on the crucial munitions and bomb kits that a country at war like Israel needs to be able to strike at enemy targets with precision.

The strategic importance of these supplies cannot be overstated. If a future US administration wanted to curtail Israeli military operations, the

most straightforward approach would be to stop such support. No one would even need to say anything.

Reflect on the immediate aftermath of the attacks on October 7. Imagine if President Biden had not swiftly deployed two aircraft carrier strike groups to the region or delivered his resolute “Don’t” speech to Hezbollah and Iran warning them to stay out of the war. While we have criticisms of some US policies, particularly those concerning Iran, we shudder to think where Israel—at one of its weakest and darkest moments—would be without the steadfast support of the United States during such a critical and volatile time.

There is, however, another side to this. Since Israel needs America, the United States has a particular leverage that other countries do not have. This is why, when President Biden asked Israel to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza, including fuel that kept Hamas fighters alive in Gaza’s tunnels, Israel complied. It is why Israel paused its fighting to allow the opening of humanitarian corridors, and why Israel waited for weeks before entering the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

It is also why, when the Americans asked Israel to wind down the ground offensive, Israel could not ignore that request. Israel can always argue, but it cannot simply dismiss American requests without serious consideration. This is the cost of having such an intimate and unique relationship.

This is important to keep in mind when considering the voices on both sides of the political spectrum—from the Right and the Left—who attacked both governments for the way the relationship functioned throughout the war. Israelis on the Right were impressed by Biden’s historic wartime visit to Israel. But they did not like his sometimes-patronizing tone, and they had a hard time understanding why Israel didn’t push back against allowing fuel and other aid into Gaza.

Israelis on the Left, on the other hand, wanted to see Biden crack down harder on Israel and the Netanyahu government. They thought that Israel needed to follow American directives, and if not, then Biden needed to cut off the aid. If he didn’t do that, they argued, he was complicit in what the IDF was doing in Gaza.

As the war dragged into 2025, some right-wing Israelis are calling for the government to stop relying on the United States for its munitions and

instead create a domestic capability to manufacture all the supplies it needs to be able to sustain a long conflict. On the other hand, it is why people on the Left want to see the United States cut off all aid to Israel—not a single cent or bomb—that can be used by the IDF in the Gaza Strip.

Both sides are playing a dangerous game that can have a dire impact on the security of the State of Israel.

The Israel-US relationship has always had its ups and downs. There have been moments when it seemed that nothing could get between the countries, and other times when there was clear "daylight"—as one president called it—between the two nations.

The relationship has stood the test of time because of an understanding, at its foundation, that Israel is not subservient to US policy and will make decisions that Washington will not always approve; likewise, America will not always stand by everything that Israel does. This is best characterized as a type of mutual respect between good friends: they don't have to agree on everything, but they can respect each other even when they don't.

Even during the initial tense months of the war, polls showed that seven out of ten Israelis wanted to see the United States play a major role in resolving the conflict. On the other side, six out of ten Americans believed Israel had valid reasons for fighting Hamas in Gaza. Nevertheless, a deeper look at the numbers is concerning. While support on the Republican side remains relatively high, Israel is rapidly losing support among Democrats.

While it would behoove Israel to do what it can to become as independent as possible in its defense capabilities, no one should be fooled into thinking that Israel can become fully independent anytime soon. With the general assessment predicting additional conflicts in the years to come, Israel needs to do more to shore up support in the United States before opening even a single production line.

"This is an existential issue," explained a former top Israeli security official who worked on Israel-US relations for decades. "I am doubtful Israel would survive without America in its corner."

Most of the Israeli government understands this. In July 2024, the Foreign Ministry created a closed working group to try to understand the direction America is headed over the next ten years. Officials have openly admitted that Israel lacks support and engagement among demographic

groups like Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans. To sustain long-term support, Israel needs to work harder.

Regardless, politicians using the relationship for political gain should never be tolerated in a country under unprecedented threat.

During the war, some senior government officials actively undermined the US-Israel alliance, painting President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris as anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic. They publicly endorsed Donald Trump ahead of the 2024 US election and inserted themselves dangerously into American politics.

Historically, Israeli prime ministers have prioritized safeguarding the relationship with Washington, understanding its critical role in national security and international diplomacy. They have understood that the relationship needs to maintain its substance and remain above politics. It needs to be based on shared values and not interests that change with the time.

So why did members of Netanyahu's government politicize something so existential? Unfortunately, for nothing more than political gain. They believed that by portraying President Biden as anti-Israel and then purporting to stand up to him, they were projecting strength to their voters and showing why they—these tough-talking politicians—were needed to keep Israel safe. It was similar to the tension that existed throughout the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency. Then, too, Netanyahu gained politically from being seen as standing up to what he presented to the Israeli public as a "hostile" president.

To meddle with this alliance is not merely playing with fire; it is toying with Israel's very future. The stakes are too high and the risks too great to let political posturing endanger a partnership that is a cornerstone of Israel's security and success.

Improve Public Diplomacy Efforts

On October 12, 2023—just five days after Hamas's brutal invasion of Israel—the minister of public diplomacy suddenly resigned. The ministry had been created a year earlier as a way to reward the lawmaker who was close to the prime minister. In reality, the ministry never had any real authority.

For a country like Israel that constantly faces an uphill battle in explaining itself to the world, there has long been a need for a proper public

diplomacy arm that can coordinate, manage, and oversee messaging and PR—what Israelis call *hasbara*—during a war. The necessity became so dire that for more than a year after the war erupted, Israel still did not have a head of the National Information Directorate, a branch of the government responsible for public diplomacy established after the 2006 Second Lebanon War to coordinate the messaging of the entire government and defense establishment.

Not having a media professional in the role was like fighting a war without an IDF chief of staff or without a head of Shin Bet. Does anyone imagine that such a thing would be possible? Of course not.

As everyone knows today, Israeli wars have a minimum of three fronts: the battlefield in Gaza/Lebanon, the Israeli home front (which is attacked by missiles), and the world stage—in the media and at international institutions like the United Nations—where Israeli military legitimacy is under attack.

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There are several reasons why media strategy does not work in Israel. First and foremost is the country's political structure. With a coalition system, in which every party holds the keys to the future of the government, the prime minister does not really have the ability to enforce strict messaging or to discipline dissenting ministers. A coalition allows Netanyahu to say that Israel is not going to resettle the Gaza Strip, and then senior ministers in the cabinet can say the opposite. He can say that Israel is doing all it can to prevent civilian casualties, and then a minister can come out and foolishly call to nuke the Gaza Strip.

The head of the National Information Directorate is meant to be appointed by the cabinet and receive invitations to all government and security meetings. The problem is that for most of Netanyahu's term as prime minister, he has chosen to leave this role vacant. In addition, during the 2024 war, he did not employ a foreign press spokesperson, forcing the IDF to explain Israeli actions to the world. This presents Israel as militaristic, especially when the IDF makes announcements about hostage returns and other matters that could be delivered by civilians.

Israel is also notorious for putting the wrong people in public diplomacy roles and not using the right officials as the country's face and voice in the media. The IDF, for example, has chosen spokespeople over the years who had never appeared in front of a camera before or worked with the media. Just a few years prior to the war, a fighter pilot was appointed the IDF's foreign media spokesperson because he happened to speak English, while an Iron Dome officer was made the top military spokesperson because he had studied media relations twenty-five years earlier in college.

Of course, the appointment of a media professional alone is not enough to fix the situation. The IDF is just one player in a public diplomacy effort that Israel needs to initiate to preserve the legitimacy of its military operations. There are others—in the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign Ministry, and the Defense Ministry—who are no less responsible for this situation.

And that is exactly the point: it is time Israel recognizes that the media front is no less important than the battlefield in Gaza or the home front at which Hamas missiles are fired. It also needs to recognize that public diplomacy is not something that is only done during wartime. It needs to prepare messaging ahead of time so that if and when a conflict erupts, people will understand why.

Having a strong media presence impacts the IDF's ability to continue its operations as equally as a rocket striking a home in Ashkelon or Sderot. One is dependent on the other: if inattention to the media front results in poor public diplomacy, and therefore international illegitimacy, IDF operations will be shortened.

It is easy to say—as many *hasbara* activists do—that the foreign media is biased and even anti-Semitic. But Israel can only make this claim after it has given its best effort, allocated the right resources, and appointed the right people to manage the media front during wartime. To this point, none of this has happened.

A country that respects itself would invest the necessary resources and appoint the right people to do the appropriate jobs. It would have experts around the table who understand how military actions will be viewed throughout the world and could frame those actions appropriately.

Media management is a profession, and that is how it needs to be looked at within the military and the government. With Israel facing additional conflicts on the horizon, the media neglect needs to stop.

Prepare an Exit Strategy

One problem that always seems to plague Israel is the failure to have an exit strategy from its conflicts in place. It is easy to be pulled into a war, Israel has learned; it is much harder to pull out of one.

Take the Second Lebanon War. Hezbollah invaded Israel and abducted two IDF reservists. Israel retaliated, and one thing led to another. At the beginning of the conflict, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that Israel was going to war to bring back the hostages and remove Hezbollah from southern Lebanon forever. He learned fairly quickly that neither of these goals was attainable, and it would take thirty-four days before the country found a way to stop fighting in the form of a United Nations Security Council resolution that saw the expansion of a UN peacekeeping force. Olmert and his government were criticized for not ending the war earlier with the same result.

Then there was Operation Cast Lead in 2009 in the Gaza Strip, which lasted three weeks and ended with an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire. In 2014, the situation was worse. Netanyahu did not want to be dragged into a war and did everything he could to avoid sending troops into Gaza, agreeing repeatedly to Egyptian-offered ceasefires only to see them all rejected by Hamas. Due to a lack of strategy, the war lasted more than fifty days.

Because Israel was taken by surprise on October 7, it is only natural that the country did not have a plan in place to extricate itself from the hostilities. But, after the war erupted, it had months to prepare one and roll it out. Nevertheless and even after more than sixteen months of fighting, Netanyahu still refused to reveal his objectives and instead pushed a populistic “Total Victory”—even carrying around a hat with the slogan—instead of answering three major questions: What does victory look like? When will the IDF be able to determine that Hamas has been sufficiently degraded? And who—or what—will replace Hamas as the governing entity in the Gaza Strip?

For almost the entire war, Netanyahu refused to answer these questions, claiming that Israel first needed to win, and only then could he explain what

will happen the “day after” in Gaza. And while the slogan might have given some people hope that victory was possible, it was not enough. Israelis deserved more.

During most of the war, whenever Israel finished operating in an area and pulled out, Hamas came back in and began reconstituting itself, forcing the IDF to go back in and clear the place once again. This came at the price of more casualties—Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians—resulting in another blow to Israel’s international standing as the operations once again fill TV screens around the world.

If Israel had been willing, from the beginning of the war, to arrange for another entity to fill the vacuum it was creating, the whole situation might have looked different. Not only is it possible that Gaza would not be as lawless as it has become, enabling Hamas to remain in control of some parts, but Israel would also have shown the world that the IDF offensive was not about destruction but part of a vision of reconstruction and a more strategic plan that was aimed at improving Palestinian life.

It is true that the Palestinian Authority is far from an ideal peace partner for Israel, but imagine if Israel allowed a small PA force to come in and fill the void once it left. Would the anarchy in Gaza be what it is now, or would the Saudis, Emiratis, Egyptians, and Americans have stepped in and ensured that the PA did its job to prevent Hamas from popping back up again? Hard to know.

Unfortunately, though, Netanyahu’s government preferred to bury its head in the sand, choosing populism over a realistic path. If it ignored the problem, the government seemed to think, maybe the problem would just go away.

The power vacuum became so critical seven months into the war that Israel’s defense minister, Yoav Gallant, said that without a political plan, the military plan will keep getting stuck in Gaza. A few months later, Gallant went so far as to publicly call Netanyahu’s promises of “total victory” in the war “gibberish.” In response, Netanyahu called Gallant “anti-Israel” and eventually fired him.

A retired US four-star general, one of the leaders of the campaign against ISIS in Syria in 2019, told us something similar. When Donald Trump took office in 2017 and started voicing slogans that were not grounded in reality as war objectives, the military campaign suffered.

“The rhetoric that is coming out of the political side of the Israeli government is difficult to translate into operations,” he added.

Gallant went so far as to warn that Netanyahu’s refusal to articulate a day-after plan meant that there were only two real options for Israel: either Hamas returns to rule Gaza or the IDF remains inside and rules the territory. Both options, he said, were dangerous for Israel and were the result of intentional indecisiveness by the prime minister.

Even without Gallant’s warnings, it is clear that Israel was ignoring what Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously wrote in the 1800s: war is a continuation of politics by other means. In other words, war is a tool, not the solution. This has been proven throughout history with countries winning wars on the battlefield only to realize they had lost the political war.

It was clear early on that for the war in Gaza to be a success for Israel, a new governing entity was needed that could stand up to Hamas, serve the Palestinian people, and be a partner to the international community in reconstructing and deradicalizing Gaza. Establishing such an entity would have thrown Yahya Sinwar off-balance and made him realize that his future hold over Gaza was in danger. It would have been a trump card in any negotiation with Hamas.

When succession is not established, a power vacuum will almost always be filled by a hostile entity. We know this by watching what has happened in every other such instance in the Middle East and other hostile territories in recent decades. Sadly, moderate elements never fill the vacuum. When Israel pulled out of Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah took over. When Israel pulled out of Gaza in 2005, Hamas took over. When the Americans toppled Gaddafi in Libya, anarchy took over. When America pulled out of Afghanistan, the Taliban took over.

Despite having these clear examples at its disposal, Israel dragged its feet, and instead of working with the Americans to get a plan in place, Netanyahu picked fights with the Biden administration at one of Israel’s most sensitive moments.

This needs to change. War can come at any moment. As Israel took a few weeks in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attacks to prepare its ground offensive, it also needed to prepare the political plan that would follow. Doing so is just as important.

In addition to preparing exit strategies for future conflicts, Israel also needs to consider a dramatic shift in its national defense doctrine and adopt a preemptive strike policy to prevent its enemies—primarily Hamas and Hezbollah—from reconstituting their capabilities once the high-intensity stage of war is completed.

The basic idea is the following: Throughout Israel's history, the country has almost never launched a preemptive war. Israel watched, for example, as Syria amassed incredible quantities of chemical weapons throughout the 1980s and 1990s but never took preemptive action, even though it knew the chemical weapons would be used against it. Israel watched after the 2006 Lebanon war as Hezbollah slowly increased its number of rockets and missiles from 20,000 to over 150,000, some with precision capabilities and larger warheads, but it never did anything aside from the occasional covert operation.

Historically speaking, there have been two exceptions for Israel to strike first—in the event of enemies pursuing nuclear weapons, and to prevent Iranian entrenchment and transfer of weapons in Syria. When it comes to nuclear weapons, Israel has long maintained a policy of preemption, seen in 1981 in the bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor and in 2007 against Syria's al-Kibar reactor. And in the decade-long "war between wars" in Syria, Israel has preemptively struck thousands of times. It was able to do this because of the breakdown in the Syrian government due to the civil war. It allowed Israel to attack and be confident that there would not be a response or that the attack would lead to a wider conflict.

Syria, yes; Lebanon, no. In other words, Israel was deterred. While it knew that Hezbollah was amassing weapons over the border and that Hamas was doing the same in Gaza, it never launched a preemptive strike to stop them. It would see Hamas fighters digging tunnels and drilling attacks on IDF bases, but it assumed everything was for show.

Which is why it does not matter what mechanism—a new government in Gaza, a UNSC resolution, or an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire—leads to the end of the offensive; Israel must change the rules of the game. The next time the IDF sees a truck loaded with rockets driving in Gaza City, it needs to attack; the next time Hamas fighters are drilling assaults on Israel, the IDF needs to attack; and the next time it sees people digging a tunnel, it needs to destroy it.

Obviously, the hope is that the October 7 war will prevent the need for preemptive strikes and more conflict. But assuming, realistically, that terrorist groups will continue to exist and proliferate, Israel can no longer afford to remain silent. Preemptive action will need to become Israel's new pillar of defense.

Strengthen National Resilience

Israel weakened itself and made the country vulnerable when the Netanyahu government, upon retaking office in January 2023, tried to steamroll a controversial judicial overhaul through the Knesset, one widely seen as a threat to Israel's democratic character.

For almost a year, Israel was torn apart. Massive protests blocked highways and paralyzed cities. People feared for the soul of their nation, warning that the reform could send Israel spiraling toward authoritarianism. There was a feeling that the country was being divided by a coalition of religious extremists who sought to promote messianic visions that were counter to the values of modern liberal democracies.

Israeli president Isaac Herzog hosted numerous rounds of talks between the sides and several compromises were proposed, but no understanding was reached. Netanyahu's camp was determined to push the legislation forward at any cost, while the opposition often refused to entertain middle-ground solutions.

As protests gained steam, reservist groups warned they would no longer serve under the Netanyahu government. The numbers were unprecedented—more than eleven hundred air force officers, including fighter pilots, and over ten thousand reservists from various IDF units, including special forces, declared they would stop reporting for duty if the legislation passed. By August 2023, just two months before the October 7 attacks, top IDF officers admitted that the military was already feeling the strain.

When a nation is divided, it is an invitation for an enemy to attack.

Both of us had concern at the time and wrote about how the judicial reform was weakening Israel. What we did not know was that officers from Aman and Shin Bet were also issuing warnings in private to the Israeli cabinet and the prime minister. In one of a series of four letters intelligence officials sent to Netanyahu, the number-two officer in Aman wrote: "All the

players in the region see that Israel is in a severe, unprecedented crisis that threatens its cohesion and weakens it. For our main enemies—Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas—this weakness is seen as part of a linear process that will ultimately lead to Israel's collapse. The current situation is an opportunity for them to accelerate and deepen Israel's distress."

We didn't know about these letters—their existence was revealed after October 7—but we were troubled in the months before Hamas's attack by a simple question: Didn't Israel's enemies see what we saw? Just as Israel takes advantage of political instability and countrywide protests by its adversaries, why wouldn't our enemies try to take advantage of the division that was so obvious to us? Any rival would look for an opportunity that gave it an advantage, and it should be obvious that the best time to attack is when your adversary is distracted, weak, and vulnerable.

This was the opportunity Israel unwittingly handed to Hamas. Netanyahu's government should have halted the legislation long before it got to the point of protests. His failure to do so despite warnings from top security officials that Israel was becoming weak was not just negligent, it was madness.

While the fighting was at its peak, prominent Israelis warned that the nation was playing with fire, endangering the Jewish people's third commonwealth—a reference to how the modern state of Israel is the third act of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. The first ended with the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and the second with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. According to tradition, the primary reason for the temples' destruction thousands of years ago was *sinat chinam*, or "wanton hatred among Jews," which weakened the nation and allowed its enemies to invade. Israel, these critics warned, was marching once again on a path to destruction.

After the Hamas attacks, Netanyahu supporters blamed the reservists for weakening Israel, claiming that their refusal to serve had emboldened Hamas. In response to a question about his responsibility for the judicial reform leading to the attacks, Netanyahu pushed back in an interview with *Time* magazine in August 2024, saying: "I think that what really affected them [Hamas], if anything, was the idea of someone refusing to serve. The refusal to serve because of an internal political debate."

What happened on October 7 was unique. As Hamas terrorists invaded, committing massacres Israelis did not believe were possible, the issues that had divided the country suddenly fell away. In the chaos, when lives were at stake, no one cared about others' position on judicial reform. Israelis from all walks of life stood together, united in a remarkable display of solidarity. Stories of courage emerged from that day, including that of Elhanan Kalmanson, a forty-two-year-old resident of the West Bank settlement of Otniel.

Elhanan worked in Mossad and was among the first to realize what was happening in the south. With his brother Menachem and his nephew Itiel Zohar, he rushed to Kibbutz Be'eri. For sixteen hours and under heavy Hamas gunfire, they rescued one hundred residents hiding from Hamas attackers. Going door to door, the trio never knew what to expect. Some of the homes they entered were empty, with pools of blood indicating they had arrived too late. Others were locked, with residents fearing the rescuers were terrorists. The trio identified themselves as Israelis from Otniel, and sometimes Elhanan yelled out the famous Shema Yisrael prayer—said at morning and evening services and known by almost every Jew—to reassure the sealed residents that they really had come to save them.

As they entered one last house, a terrorist hiding in a corner opened fire, killing Elhanan and wounding Menachem.

This story resonated not just because of the Kalmansons' courage and sacrifice but also because of the stark differences between Otniel and Be'eri.

Search online for "West Bank settlement," and you might see a picture of Otniel, an isolated community surrounded by Palestinian villages perched on a mountain south of the city of Hebron. It is home to just over one thousand residents, all religious and stridently ideological. In the November 2022 elections, for example, 71 percent of Otniel's voters supported the far-right party led by Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, while another 10 percent backed Netanyahu.

Be'eri was the polar opposite—80 percent of its voters supported left-wing parties like Labor, Meretz, and Yesh Atid at the ballots. A mere nineteen people—around 2 percent of the community—voted for Netanyahu.

On October 6, if you had asked Be’eri’s residents about Otniel, they might have said the settlement should be evacuated to allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Likewise, Otniel’s residents might have viewed Be’eri as out of touch with Israeli reality.

On October 7 though, none of that mattered. When attacked, Israelis showed there was more that united them than divided them.

The attack on October 7 awakened within Israelis a recognition that what had happened was not new. Every Israeli had heard stories from his or her grandparents about similar pogroms and attacks—whether Kristallnacht in Berlin in 1938 or the Farhud in Baghdad in 1941.

The difference was that in 2023, Israeli Jews felt safe. They took their country for granted and believed that the IDF was invincible. They believed the message from their politicians that the nation needed judicial reform, and they followed their leaders as they steered the country down a path of division instead of unity.

The question now is whether the Israeli people have truly learned from the events of October 7 and now recognize that they alone hold the keys to their future. We all know now that Israel is not safe. It faces a future fraught with challenges, and unfortunately, war will continue to be part of Israel’s story.

However, what we learned after October 7 is that Israel can overcome any external threat. What it cannot overcome is the danger that lies within it—a threat born of division and self-inflicted harm. It is time for Israel to rise above internal discord and recognize that unity is its strongest defense. This is the legacy we owe to those who stood together on October 7—and to the future generations who will inherit the nation we shape today.

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By the time October 7 came around, we had completed a few chapters.

The Hamas attacks and the ensuing war changed the country as well as our book. From a story about Israel's journey to create a precision-strike capability, we pivoted and told a different story—the one of how October 7 happened and what happened in the thirty years before it that led to this war.

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INDEX

The index that appeared in the print version of this title does not match the pages in your e-book. Please use the search function on your e-reading device to search for terms of interest. For your reference, the terms that appear in the print index are listed below.

Abraham Accords
Abu Marzook, Mousa
Abu Ras, Marwan
Adar, Tamir
Aharon, Benny
al-Ahmar, Hamid Abdullah
“Al-Aqsa Flood,”. *See also* Hamas attack
al-Arouri, Saleh
Albag, Liri
Albright, Madeleine
Al Emadi, Mohammed
al-Ghoul, Adnan
al-Makadmeh, Ibrahim
al-Musawi, Abbas
al-Qaeda
al-Qaradawi, Yusuf
al-Sayed, Abbas
al-Shurafa, Said
al-Sisi, Abdel Fattah
Al Thani, Hamad bin Khalifa
al-Wazir, Jihad
al-Zahar, Mahmoud
al-Zarqawi, Abu Musab
al-Zawahiri, Ayman
Aman
  aftermath and failures
  “Devil’s Advocate Unit”

events leading to attack; *Jericho Walls,*; night before Gaza war
Gaza war of 2014
Hamas attack
Harpoon and Hamas funding
intelligence reform
targeted strikes
tunnel network
Amikam
Annan, Kofi
anti-Semitism
Aqel, Emad
Arab Bank
Arad, Ron
Arafat, Yasser
Argaman, Nadav
Ariev, Karina
Austin, Lloyd
Ayyash, Yahya
Azzam, Abdullah

Bahar, Ahmed
Bank of China
Bank of Israel
Barak, Ehud
Barnea, David
Bar, Ronen
events leading to attack; night before; warnings
Hamas attack
targeted strikes
Basiuk, Oded
Battle of Gaza
Begin, Menachem
Ben-Gvir, Itamar
Bennett, Naftali
Berger, Agam
Biden, Joe
Binder, Shlomi
bin Laden, Osama
Bitton, Yuval
“Black March”
Blair, Tony
Boanish, Ziv
Brik, Itzhak
Bush, George W.

Camp David Summit (2000)
Cantor, Eric
Change Government

Clausewitz, Carl von
Clinton, Bill
Cohen, Haim
Cohen, Yitzhak
  events leading to attack
  Gaza war
  Hamas attack
Cohen, Yoram
Cohen, Yossi
conceptzia
containment policy
cryptocurrencies

Dadon, Avshalom
Dado, Ziv
Dagan, Meir
Dayan, Moshe
de Gaulle, Charles
Deif, Mohammed
  assassination/assassination attempts
  Hamas attack; planning
Dermer, Ron
Dichter, Avi
director of national intelligence (DNI)
Disengagement Plan
Duffy, Kevin

Egypt
  Camp David Accords (1979)
  Gaza war
  Gaza war of 2014
  Hamas attack
  protests of 1974
  Six-Day War
  tunnels and “Philadelphi Corridor”
  War of Independence
  Yom Kippur War
Eisenkot, Gadi
Eli settlement attack
Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip
Erez crossing
Eshel, Roni
exit strategy, lack of

Fatah
52nd Armored Battalion
Finkelman, Yaron
  events leading to attack
  Gaza war

Hamas attack
First Intifada
Fox, Yehuda
Freud, Sigmund

Gallant, Yoav
events leading to attack
exit strategy, lack of
firing of
Gaza war
Hamas attack
Gantz, Benny
Gaza, withdrawal of 2005
Gaza Division
events leading to attack
Gaza war and tunnel system
Hamas attack
Jericho Walls
Gaza Health Ministry
Gaza-Israel clashes of 2022
Gaza “Metro”
Gaza protests of 2023
Gaza war
civilian population
death toll
first truce of November 25
Hamas documents recovered
humanitarian supply lines
initial phase of
mental challenges facing soldiers
misconceptions about
Gaza war of 2008
Gaza war of 2014
Ghebreyesus, Tedros Adhanom
Gilboa, Daniela
Givati Brigade
Gouri, Haim
Greenberg, Tomer
Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)
Gush Etzion kidnapping

Hacham, David
Hadera bus station attack
Halevi, Herzi
aftermath and failures
events leading to attack; warnings
Hamas attack
Haliva, Aharon

aftermath and failures
events leading to attack; night before
Hamami, Assaf
Hamas
Abu Marzook and
attack of October 7. *See* Hamas attack of October 7
Ayyash's assassination
Ben-Gvir's assassination
Bennett and
birth of
"book of rules"
charter
corruption of
documents recovered
funding
infrastructure
leadership in Doha
"liberation strategy"
Lieberman's document
military buildup
Shehada and
targeted strikes
Hamas attack of October 7
aftermath; failures. *See also* Gaza war
casualties
events leading to; night before
Kfar Aza attack
Nahal Oz attack
planning
postwar inquiries
United 504 and
warnings; *Jericho Walls*; Lieberman's document; SIM card alert; *tatzpitaniyot*
Hamdan, Osama
Haniyeh, Ismail
assassination/assassination attempts
Battle of Gaza
Hamas and
Hamas attack
Harpoon
Harris, Kamala
hasbara
Hatzav
Herzog, Isaac
Hezbollah
electronics device attack
events leading to attack
Gaza war
Hamas attack

Harpoon
Operation Lightning Strike
Radwan Unit
Second Lebanon War
tunnel network
hostages
Gaza war; Unit 504’s role
Hamas attack
videos
warnings
human intelligence (HUMINT)
humanitarian aid
humanitarian crisis

intelligence. *See* Aman; Mossad
intelligence reform
Iran. *See also* Hezbollah
funds
Gaza war
Hamas attack
Lieberman’s document
nuclear program
targeted strikes
Iranian strikes of 2024
Iraq
Iraq War
Iron Dome
Islamic Jihad
Islamic University of Gaza
Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI)
Israeli Air Force (IAF)
Gaza war
Hamas attack
night before attack
targeted strikes
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). *See also specific persons and units*
aftermath of attack
Bennett and
the Bor
compulsory service
exit strategy
force posture
General Staff
intelligence reform
Operations Directorate
public diplomacy
Southern Command. *See* Southern Command
targeted strikes

warnings; *Jericho Walls*; SIM card alert
Israeli judicial reform protests 2023
Israeli SIM cards
Issa, Marwan
IYS Yapi Co.
Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades

Jabari, Ahmed
Jabotinsky, Vladimir
Jericho Walls
jihad
Jordan
judicial reform

Kalmanson, Elhanan
Kennedy, John F.
Kerry, John
Kfar Saba
Khan Younis
Khomeini, Ruhollah
Kibbutz Be’eri
Kibbutz Nahal Oz
attack
Dayan’s speech of 1956
Kibbutz Negba
Kohavi, Aviv
Koubi, Micha

Lapid, Yair
Lebanon. *See also* Hezbollah
electronics device attack
events leading to attack
Gaza War
Hamas attack
Second Lebanon War
tunnel network
Levy, Ronen
Levy, Udi
Libya
Lieberman, Avigdor
Lifshitz, Yocheved

Maor, Elam
Mashal, Khaled
Mayo, Moshe
media management
Megidish, Ori
Mehola Junction bombing
Meir, Golda

Mesh, Oriya
Mordechai, Yoav
Morocco
Morsi, Mohamed
Mossad
  assassinations
  Dagan and
  Gaza war
  Harpoon
  Lebanon electronics device attack
Mubarak, Hosni
Mujama al-Islamiya
Munich Olympics massacre
Muslim Brotherhood

Nahal Brigade
Nahal Oz attack
Nasrallah, Hassan
National Information Directorate
national resilience, strengthening
Nazi Germany
Netanyahu, Benjamin
  Abu Marzook and
  aftermath of attack
  Change Government and Bennett
  decision-making
  events leading to attack; warnings
  exit strategy
  first term as prime minister
  Gallant’s appointment
  Gaza protests of 2023
  Gaza visit of 1986
  Gaza war of 2014
  Hamas attack
  Hamas funding
  Lieberman’s appointment
  Operation Lightning Strike
  Operation Musical Chairs
  Operation Protective Edge
  public diplomacy
  tunnel network
  US-Israel alliance
9/11 attacks (2001)
Northern Gaza Brigade
North Korea
Nova Music Festival
nuclear weapons and capability
  Iran

Iraq
Nukhba

Obama, Barack
Obeid, Abdel Karim
October 7 attack. *See* Hamas attack of October 7
Odeh, Ahmed
Olmert, Ehud
162nd Armored Division
188th Armored Brigade
open-source intelligence (OSINT)
Operation Black Belt
Operation Breaking Dawn
Operation Cast Lead
Operation City of Refuge
Operation Defensive Shield
Operation Guardian of the Walls
Operation Lightning Strike
Operation Musical Chairs
Operation Pillar of Defense
Operation Protective Edge
Oslo Accords
Otniel

Palestinian Authority (PA)
Palestinian elections of 2006
Palestinian elections of 2012
Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)
Paratroopers Brigade
Pardo, Tamir
Park Hotel bombing
Paz, Eitan
Perez, Daniel
phalanx
preemptive strikes
public diplomacy, improving efforts

Qafisheh, Hisham Yunis Ichiyeh
Qassam rockets
Qatar
funds and support for Hamas
Quds Force

Rabinowitz, Tal
Rabin, Yitzhak
Radwan Unit
Rafah
Rashid, Mohammed
Reuven, Avichail

Rosenberg, Elizabeth
Rosenfeld, Avi
Rotberg, Roi
Russia (Soviet Union)
Russia-Ukraine War

Saadon, Ilan
Saad, Raad
Sa’ar, Amit
Sādāt, Anwar el-
Samia, Yom Tov
Sariel, Yossi
Sasportas, Avi
Saudi Arabia
Sayeret Matkal
Sderot
Second Intifada
Second Lebanon War
“Security Quadrangle”
Shahin, Zohadi Ali Zahadi
Shaldag Unit
Shalit, Gilad
Shanab, Ismail Abu
Sharon, Ariel
  Dagan and
  Disengagement Plan
  targeted strikes
Shaya, Uzi
Shehada, Salah
Shifa Hospital
Shin Bet
  Ayyash’s assassination
  events leading to attack; night before; warnings
  Hamas attack
  Hamas funding and Harpoon
  intelligence reform
  Operation Musical Chairs
  Sinwar and
  targeted strikes
  tunnel network
Shomer, Yisrael
Shuja’iyya
Shukr, Fuad
Simchat Torah
sinat chinam
Sinwar, Mohammed
Sinwar, Yahya
  birth of Hamas and

death of
Gaza-Israeli clashes of 2022
Gaza war
Hamas attack; planning
imprisonment of; release
leadership of Hamas
Palestinian elections of 2012
tunnel network
Six-Day War
Smotrich, Bezalel
Soleimani, Qassem
Southern Command
events leading to attack; night before; warnings
Gaza war
Hamas attack
tunnel network
Southern Gaza Brigade
Steinberg, Yonatan
Suez Canal
suicide bombings
synchronization
Syria
Six-Day War
Yom Kippur War

targeted strikes
tatzpitaniyot
Tel Nof Airbase
Temple Mount
Toledano, Eliezer
Trend Gyo
Trump, Donald
tunnels (tunnel network)
detection system
Gaza war; destruction methods; firefights inside
Gaza war of 2014
Operation Lightning Strike
types of
underground wall
Unit 504's role
Turkey

United Arab Emirates (UAE)
United Arab List (Ra'am)
United Nations (UN)
Partition Plan
Security Council
Unit 504

Gaza war
Hamas attack
training
Unit 8200
US Antiterrorism Act of 1990
US-Israel alliance, bolstering
Uzmanlar Co.

War of Independence
West Bank
Wultz, Daniel

Yaalon, Moshe
Yassin, Ahmed
assassination of
birth of Hamas and
Haniyeh and
Shehada and
Sinwar and
Yom Kippur War

Zacharia, Eden
Zahedi, Mohammad
Ziv, Israel

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CONTENTS

Title Page
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Dedication
Introduction: A Country Asleep

1. How Did This Happen?
2. Overcoming the Fear of Gaza
3. The Tunnel Blindness
4. The Birth of Hamas
5. Targeted Strikes
6. Paying Terrorist Blackmail

Conclusion: Preventing Another October 7
Acknowledgments
Index
Also by Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot
About the Authors
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